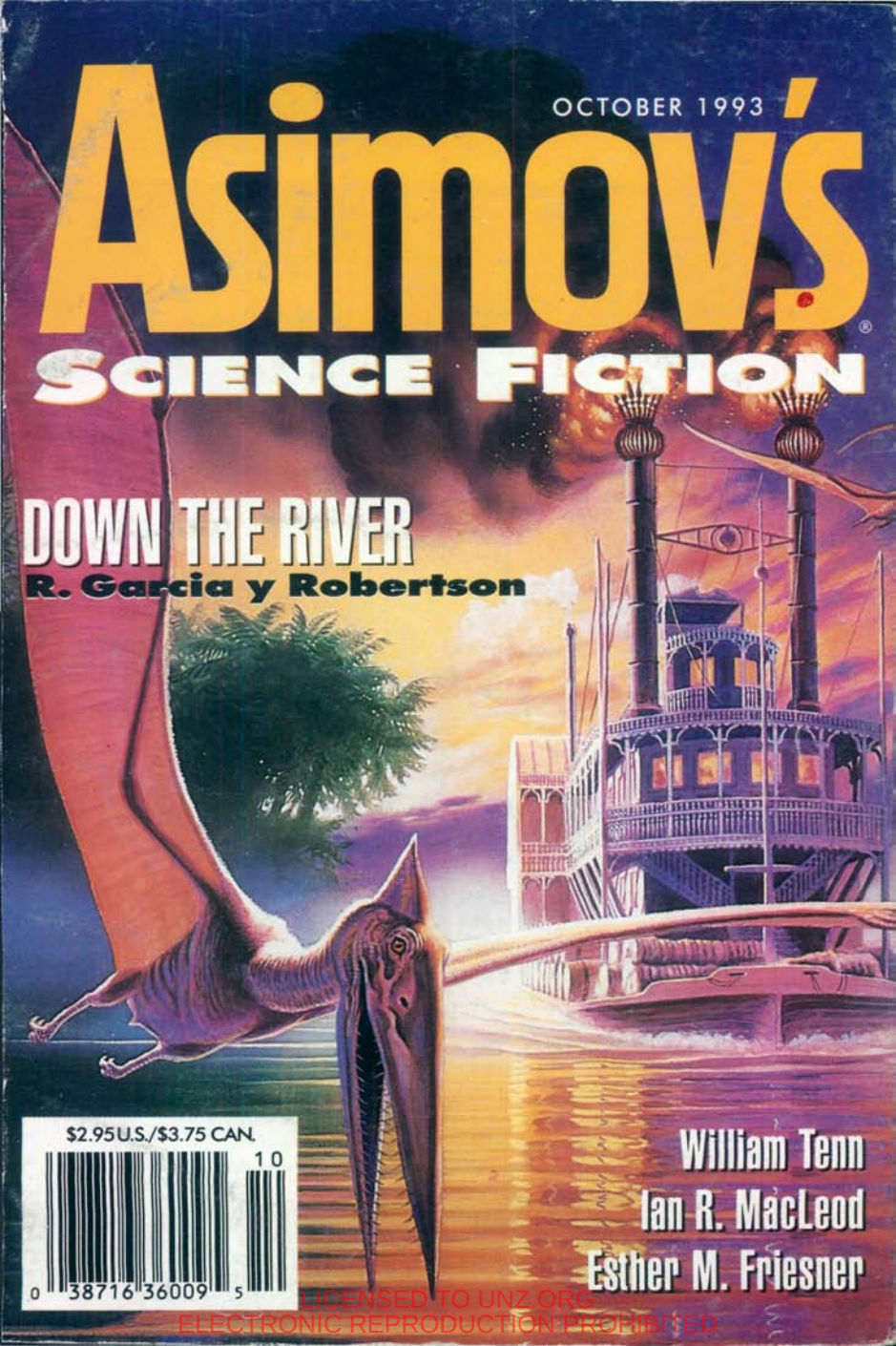

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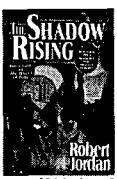

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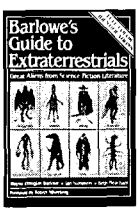

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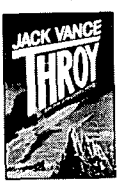

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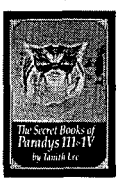

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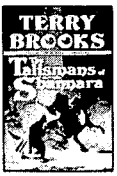

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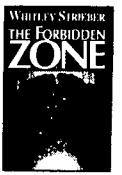

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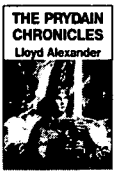

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Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1993 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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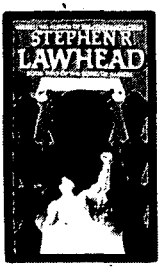

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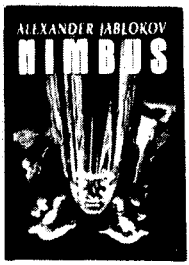

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I send my most hearty congratulations on a job most excellently done! I just finished reading "Martin on a Wednesday" by Nancy Kress of "Beggars in Spain" fame. This March 1993 issue is starting off as another classic.

This is my first time sending in comments to any sort of magazine so bear with me. First off I want to say what a pleasure it is to discover such wondrous gems you have hiding in your magazine. I have only been reading *Asimov's* since last year's October issue. That's where I discovered a small gem in the novelette "Jumping the Road" by Jack Dann. As soon as I read it I had to have a subscription.

The first one to honor my mailbox was the special November 1992 issue. I was truly moved. I read all of the Robot and Foundation novels by Dr. Asimov when I was in high school. All the comments by long-time friends and associates moved me dearly. I came to realize not just that had we lost a giant in the science fiction field, but we had lost one of the truly great men of ours or any other time. I am sorry I never had the chance to meet him. I will treasure his written words to my grave.

The authors I have discovered and have come to enjoy in your pages have opened my eyes. M. Shayne Bell, Greg Egan, Mary Rosenblum, Lisa Goldstein, Maureen F. McHugh, Tony Daniel, and Janet Kagan. These are the voices that should lead us into the uncertain and swirling void of the twenty-first century.

The two who have most impressed me are M. Shayne Bell and Greg Egan. Each with a voice solid, individual, and sure. Each with a vision unto themselves. I hope they stay with us for a long time to come. Same with the others.

I have been an avid collector of science fiction books for the last ten years. I was never a great fan of short fiction until now. What wonders have passed me by because of my ignorance? Well, no more, thanks to you. Keep up the incredible work.

Kenny Cross
Seal Beach, CA

P.S. Just got the special April 1993 issue! Cannot wait to read "The Consort" by the Good Doctor.

Dear Gardner Dozois,
Sheila Williams, et al.:

I am writing this letter to express some feelings regarding "One Morning in the Looney Bin" by Maggie Flinn.

I was moved in many ways by said story. I can only wish that

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someone would fix things in my world the way they were fixed for Reilly Grant. As I have been in a mental hospital for the clinical depression I suffer from, I could really identify with the events and circumstances of the story.

It touched me very deeply, as I have said, and I can only say in closing that I am grateful for the magazine's being put into Braille. Keep such thought-provoking and moving stories coming!

Kathie Spellman

Dear Mr. Dozois:

The passing of the Good Doctor is a loss the world seems ill equipped to gauge. The world should have been more stunned than it seemed to be. Was such a genius, such a voice of reason and rationality, such a great "explainer" only, after all, a voice that barely even whispered to the majority of Americans? Is my perspective on the literary world so distorted because Asimov almost completely fills my sky, eclipsing many other stars, as Jupiter would, seen from one of its moons?

It's hard to imagine a world without Asimov ready to clarify it. He mastered, not only science, but also history, the Bible, geography and limericks. The telling of his accomplishments and an analysis of his work would be as daunting as the subjects he tackled with such flare. And if it took an Isaac Asimov to explain Isaac Asimov, he helped us there too. Two massive volumes of autobiography (and a third on the way) convey a long and remarkable life in rich detail.

I can't help but wonder if, now that he's gone, we will start seeing

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erudite, and not so erudite, analyses of the man and his work. A subject as broad and deep as Isaac Asimov, like the fields of knowledge he reveled in, reliably spawns great numbers of interpretations. It would, I think, have been his wish that we let his own words stand, so as not to read our bent into his writings.

Isaac Asimov will be missed by those who knew him, or read his work. But in an age when rationality, knowledge, and understanding of science will become more crucial every day, Isaac Asimov, "the great explainer," will be missed by millions who probably will never even know who he was. Our responsibility to the Good Doctor, and to our own children, is to make sure they learn who he was, and benefit from his having written.

With Respect and Best Regards

John Vester
Rancho Cordova, CA

Dear Editor:

I have always been a quiet reader —one who never felt the urge to write or criticize or commend the stories and articles I read in your magazine or others. But now I find myself with a great need to say thank you to one of the people who got me hooked at the age of twelve on science fiction.

It is one of the side effects of writing that one cannot deduce the physical status of the author from his writing. He or she may be disabled, body-builder perfect, coyote ugly, or breathtakingly beautiful, yet irregardless, they transport a reader into flights of fantasy or alternate realities (possible and impossible) via the printed page.

It was because of this effect, that I did not know of Dr. Asimov's illness until the announcement of his enforced curtailment of his writing. It didn't take a crystal ball to figure out from that short, dry paragraph that it was a grave illness that would cause him to cut back on his life's greatest joy, a joy communicated by his every written word.

So, belatedly, here is my small thanks, Dr. Asimov, for your considerable contributions—you may have been a mortal man, as we all are, but you lived beyond your time, educated in modern science, but never fettered by it. You live on in your books and in our hearts—ageless, timeless, beloved.

My words will seem too little too late to others, but I will miss him, though all I know of him is what I have read. But just perhaps, that will be the greatest thanks I could give—to have read.

Judy Dormelly
Buffalo, NY

Dear Asimovians,

I'd just finished reading "Entrada" when I found myself thinking "whoa, I've gotta subscribe to this magazine!" Mary Rosenblum's techno-mystery is one of the best I've ever read. Aces!

"Coney Island of the Mind" was pretty hard to follow, but hey, it was great too!

In two words: great issue! In three: first class job! But I digress. If you're still listening, take heart, it's coming to a close. I'd just like to say thanks for entertaining me, and for allowing me to express that thanks. Here's looking at you, kids.

Seth Joseph
Oklahoma City, OK

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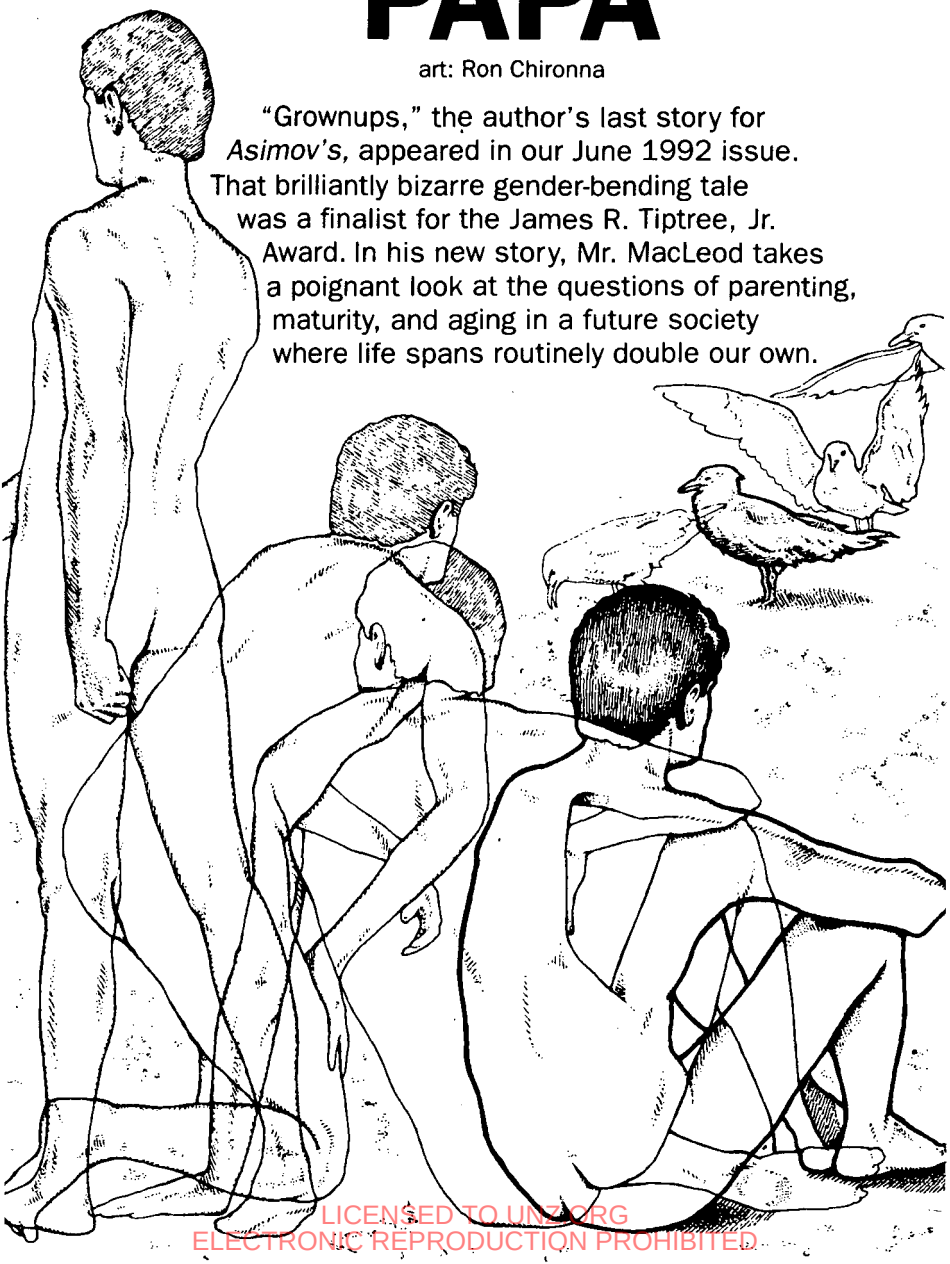
Ian R. MacLeod

PAPA

art: Ron Chironna

"Grownups," the author's last story for *Asimov's,* appeared in our June 1992 issue. That brilliantly bizarre gender-bending tale was a finalist for the James R. Tiptree, Jr. Award. In his new story, Mr. MacLeod takes a poignant look at the questions of parenting, maturity, and aging in a future society where life spans routinely double our own.



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My grandchildren have brought time back to me. Even when they have gone, my house will never be the same. Of course, I didn't hear them when they arrived—on this as on many other mornings, I hadn't bothered to turn on my eardrums—but a tingling jab from the console beside my bed finally caught my attention. What had I been doing? Lying in the shadowed heat, watching the sea breeze lift the dappled blinds? Not even that. I had been somewhere distant. A traveler in white empty space.

The blinds flicker. My bedhelper emerges from its wallspace, extending mantis arms for me to grab. One heave, and I'm sitting up. Another, and I'm standing. The salt air pushes hot, cool. I pause to blink. Slow, quick, with both eyes. A moment's concentration. Despite everything Doc Fanian's told me, it's never become like riding a bicycle, but then who am I, now, to ride a bike? And then my eardrums are *on*, and the sound of everything leaps into me. I hear the waves, the sea, the lizards stirring on the rocks, distant birdsong, the faint whispering trees. I hear the slow drip of the showerhead on the bathroom tiles, and the putter of a rainbow-winged flyer somewhere up in the hot blue sky. I hear the papery breath and heartbeat of an old man aroused from his mid-morning slumbers. And I hear voices—young voices—outside my front door.

"He *can't* be in."

"Well, he can't be *out* . . ."

"Let's—"

"—No, you."

"I'll—"

"—listen. I think . . ."

"It's him."

Looking down at myself, I see that, yes, I am clothed, after a fashion: shorts and a T-shirt—crumpled, but at least not the ones I slept in last night. So I *did* get dressed today, eat breakfast, clean up afterward, shave. . . .

"Are you in there, Papa?"

My granddaughter Agatha's voice.

"Wait a moment," I croak, sleep-stiff, not really believing. Heading for the hall.

The front door presents an obstacle. There's the voice recognition system my son Bill had fitted for me. Not that anyone mugs or burgles anyone else any longer, but Bill's a worrier—he's past eighty now, and of that age.

"Are you all right in there?"

Saul's voice this time.

"Yes, I'm fine."

The simple routine of the voicecode momentarily befuddles me. The tiny screen says *User Not Recognized.* I try again, and then again, but my voice is as dry as my limbs are until the lubricants get working. My grandchildren can hear me outside, and I know they'll think Papa's talking to himself.

At last. My front door swings open.

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Saul and Agatha. Both incredibly real in the morning brightness with the cypressed road shimmering behind them. I want them to stand there for a few moments so I can catch my breath—and for the corneas I had fitted last winter to darken—but I'm hugged and I'm kissed and they're past me and into the house before any of my senses can adjust. I turn back into the hall. Their luggage lies in a heap. Salt-rimed, sandy, the colors bleached, bulging with washing and the excitements of far-off places. *Venice. Paris. New York. The Sea of Tranquillity.* Even then, I have to touch to be sure.

"Hey Papa, where's the *food?*"

Agatha crouches down on the tiles in my old-fashioned kitchen, gazing into the open fridge. And Saul's tipping back a self-cooling carafe he's found above the sink, his brown throat working. They're both in cut-off shorts, ragged tops. Stuff they've obviously had on for days. And here's me worrying about what I'm wearing—but the same rules don't apply. Agatha stands up, fills her mouth with a cube of ammoniac brie from the depths of the fridge. Saul wipes his lips on the back of his hand, smiles. As though he senses that the hug on the doorstep might have passed me by, he comes over to me. He gives me another. Held tight, towered over, I feel the rub of his stubbled jaw against my bald head as he murmurs *Papa, it's good to be here.* And Agatha joins in, kisses me with cheese crumbs on her lips, bringing the sense of all the miles she's traveled to get here, the salt dust of a million far-off places. I'm tempted to pull away when I feel the soft pressure of her breasts against my arm. But this moment is too sweet, too innocent. I wish it could go on forever.

Finally, we step back and regard each other.

"You should have let me know you were coming," I say, wondering why I have to spoil this moment by complaining. "I'd have stocked up."

"We tried, Papa," Agatha says.

Saul nods. "A few days ago at the shuttleport in Athens, Papa. And then I don't know how many times on the ferry through the islands. But all we got was the engaged flag."

"I've been meaning," I say, "to get the console fixed."

Saul smiles, not believing for one moment. He asks, "Would you like me to take a look?"

I shrug. Then I nod Yes, because the console really does need reprogramming. And Saul and Agatha were probably genuinely worried when they couldn't get through, even though nothing serious could happen without one of my implant alarms going off.

"But you don't mind us coming, do you, Papa? I mean, if we're getting in the way or anything. Just say and we'll go." Agatha's teasing, of course, just to see the look on Papa's face.

"No, no." I lift my hands in surrender, feeling the joints starting to ease. "It's wonderful to have you here. Stay with us as long as you want. Do whatever you like. That's what grandparents are for."

They nod sagely, as though Papa's spoken a great truth. But sharp-eyed glances are exchanged across the ancient kitchen table, and I catch

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the echo of my words before they fade. And I realize what Papa's gone and said. *We. Us.*

Why did I use the plural? Why? When Hannah's been dead for more than seventy years?

An hour later, after the hormones and lubricants have stabilized, I'm heading down to the port in my rattletrap open-top Ford. Off shopping to feed those hungry mouths even though I want to hold onto every moment of Saul and Agatha's company.

White houses, cool streets framing slabs of sea and sky. I drive down here to the port once or twice a week to get what little stuff I need these days, but today I'm seeing things I've never noticed before. Canaries and flowers on the window ledges. A stall filled with candied fruit and marzipan mice, wafting a sugared breeze. I park the Ford in the square, slap on my autolegs and head off just as the noonday bells begin to chime.

By the time I reach Antonio's, my usual baker, the display on the fat-wheeled trolley I picked up in the concourse by the fountains is already reading *Full Load.* I really should have selected the larger model, but you have to put in extra money or something. Antonio grins. He's a big man, fronting slopes of golden crust, cherry-nippled lines of iced bun. Sweaty and floured, he loves his job the way everyone seems to these days.

I'm pointing everywhere. Two, no, three loaves. And up there; never mind, I'll have some anyway. And those long twirly things—are they sweet?—I've always wondered. . . .

"You've got visitors?" He packs the crisp warm loaves into crisp brown bags.

"My grandchildren." I smile, broody as a hen. "They came out of nowhere this morning."

"That's great," he beams. He'd slap my shoulder if he could reach that far across the marble counter. "How old?"

I shrug. What is it now? Bill's eighty-something. So—nearly thirty. But that can't be right. . . .

"Anyway," he hands me the bags, too polite to ask if I can manage. "Now's a good time." My autolegs hiss as I back out toward the door. The loaded trolley follows.

But he's right. Now *is* a good time. The very best.

I drop the bags of bread on my way back to the square. The trolley's too full to help even if I knew how to ask it, and I can't bend down without climbing out of the autolegs, but a grey-haired woman gathers them up from the pavement and helps me back to the car.

"You *drive?*" she asks as I clank across the square toward my Ford and the trolley rumbles behind in attendance. It's a museum piece. She chuckles again. Her face is hidden under the shadow-weave of a straw sunhat.

Then she says, "Grandchildren—how lovely," as nectarines and oranges tumble into the back seat. I can't remember telling her about Saul

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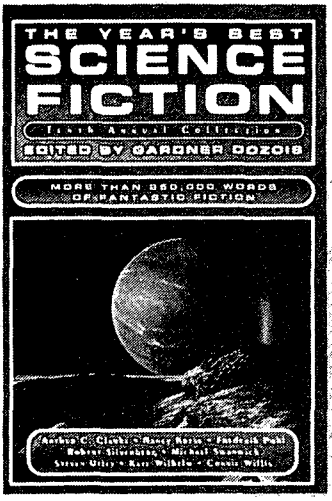

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and Agatha as we walked—in my absorption, I can't even remember speaking—but perhaps it's the only possible explanation for someone of my age doing this amount of shopping. When I look up to thank her, she's already heading off under the date palms. The sway of a floral print dress. Crinkled elbows and heels, sandals flapping, soft wisps of grey hair, the rings on her slightly lumpen fingers catching in sunlight. I'm staring, thinking. Thinking, if only.

Back at the house, hours after the quick trip I'd intended, the front door is open, unlocked. The thing usually bleeps like mad when I leave it even fractionally ajar, but my grandchildren have obviously managed to disable it. I step out of my autolegs. I stand there in my own hall, feeling the tingling in my synthetic hip, waiting for my corneas to adjust to the change in light.

"I'm back!"

There's silence—or as close to silence as these eardrums will allow. Beating waves. Beating heart. And breathing. Soft, slow breathing. I follow the sound.

Inside my bathroom, it looks as if Saul and Agatha have been washing a large and very uncooperative dog. Sodden towels are everywhere, and the floor is a soapy lake, but then they're of a generation that's used to machines clearing up after them. Beyond, in the shadowed double room they've taken for their own, my grandchildren lie curled. Agatha's in my old off-white dressing gown—which, now I've seen her in it, I'll never want to wash or replace. Her hair spills across the pillow, her thumb rests close to her mouth. And Saul's stretched on the mattress facing the other way, naked, his bum pressed against hers. Long flanks of honey-brown. He's smooth and still, lovely as a statue.

There's a tomb-memorial I saw once—in an old cathedral, in old England—of two sleeping children, carved in white marble. I must have been there with Hannah, for I remember the ease of her presence beside me, or at least the absence of the ache that has hardly ever left me since. And I remember staring at those sweet white faces and thinking how impossible that kind of serenity was, even in the wildest depths of childhood. But now it happens all the time. Everything's an everyday miracle.

I back away. Close the door, making a clumsy noise that I hope doesn't wake them. I unload the shopping in the kitchen by hand, watching the contents of my bags diminish as if by magic as I place them on the shelves. So much becoming so little. But never mind; there's enough for a late lunch, maybe dinner. And my grandchildren are sleeping and the house swirls with their dreams. It's time, anyway, to ring Bill.

My son's in his office. Bill always looks different on the console, and as usual I wonder if this is a face he puts on especially for me. In theory, Bill's like Antonio—working simply because he loves his job—but I find that hard to believe. Everything about Bill speaks of duty rather than pleasure. I see the evening towers of a great city through a window

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beyond his shoulder. The lights of homeward-bound flyers drifting like sparks in a bonfire-pink sky. But which city? Bill's always moving, chasing business. My console finds him anyway, but it isn't programmed to tell you *where* unless you specifically ask. And I don't know how.

"Hi, Dad."

Two or three beats. Somewhere, nowhere, space dissolves, instantaneously relaying this silence between us. Bill's waiting for me to say why I've called. He knows Papa wouldn't call unless he had a reason.

I say, "You look fine, son."

He inclines his head in acknowledgment. His hair's still mostly a natural red-brown—which was Hannah's color—but I see that he's started to recede, and go grey. And there are deep creases around the hollows of his eyes as he stares at me. If I didn't know any better, I'd almost say that my son was starting to look old. "You too, Dad."

"Your kids are here. Saul and Agatha."

"I see." He blinks, moves swiftly on. "How are they?"

"They're—" I want to say, great, wonderful, incredible; all those big stupid puppy dog words. "—they're fine. Asleep at the moment, of course."

"Where have they been?"

I wish I could just shrug, but I've never been comfortable using nonverbal gestures over the phone. "We haven't really talked yet, Bill. They're tired. I just thought I'd let you know."

Bill purses his long, narrow lips. He's about to say something, but then he holds it back. *Tired. Haven't talked yet. Thought I'd let you know.* Oh, the casualness of it all! As though Saul and Agatha were here with their Papa last month and will probably call in next as well.

"Well, thanks, Dad. You must give them my love."

"Any other messages?"

"Tell them I'd be happy if they could give me a call."

"Sure, I'll do that. How's Meg?"

"She's fine."

"The two of you should come down here."

"You could come *here*, Dad."

"We must arrange something. Anyway, I'm sure you're—"

"—pretty busy, yes. But thanks for ringing, Dad."

"Take care, son."

"You too."

The screen snows. After a few moments' fiddling, I manage to turn it off.

I set about getting a meal for my two sleeping beauties. Salads, cheese, crusty bread, slices of pepper and carrot, garlicy dips. Everything new and fresh and raw. As I do so, the conversation with Bill drones on in my head. These last few years, they can go on for hours inside me after we've spoken. Phrases and sentences tumbling off into new meaning. Things unsaid. Now, I'm not even sure why I bothered to call him. There's obviously no reason why he should be worried about Saul and Agatha. Was it just to brag—Hey, look, I've got your kids!—or was it in the hope

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that, ringing out of the blue in what were apparently office hours in whatever city he was in, I'd really make contact?

Slicing with my old steel knives on the rainbow-wet cutting board, I remember Bill the young man, Bill the child, Bill the baby. Bill when Hannah and I didn't even have a name for him two weeks out of the hospital. As Hannah had grown big in those ancient days of pre-birth uncertainty, we'd planned on Paul for a boy, Esther for a girl. But when he arrived, when we took him home and bathed him, when we looked at this tiny creature like some red Indian totem with his bulbous eyes, enormous balls, and alarmingly erect penis, Paul had seemed entirely wrong. He used to warble when he smelled Hannah close to him—we called it his milk song. And he waved his legs in the air and chuckled and laughed at an age when babies supposedly aren't able to do that kind of thing. So we called him William. An impish, mischievous name. In our daft parental certainty, even all the dick and willy connotations had seemed entirely appropriate. But by the time he was two, he was Bill to everyone. A solid, practical name that fit, even though calling him Bill was something we'd never dreamed or wanted or intended.

In the heat of mid-afternoon, beneath the awning on the patio between sky and sea, Papa's with his offsprings, sated with food. I feel a little sick, to be honest, but I'm hoping it doesn't show.

"Your dad rang," I say, finding the wine has turned the meaning of the sentence around—as though, for once, Bill had actually made the effort and contacted *me*.

"Rang?" Agatha puzzles over the old, unfamiliar phrase. Rang. Called. She nods. "Oh yeah?" She lifts an espadrilled foot to avoid squashing the ants who are carrying off breadcrumbs and scraps of salad. "What did he say?"

"Not much." *I'd be happy if they'd call.* Did he mean he'd be unhappy otherwise? "Bill seemed pretty busy," I say. "Oh, and he wanted to know where you've been these last few months."

Saul laughs. "That sounds like Dad, all right."

"He's just interested," I say, feeling I should put up some kind of defense.

Agatha shakes her head. "You know what Dad gets like, Papa." She wrinkles her nose. "All serious and worried. Not that you shouldn't be serious about things. But not about *everything*."

"And he's so bloody possessive," Saul agrees, scratching his ribs.

I try not to nod. But they're just saying what children have always said: waving and shouting across a generation gap that gets bigger and bigger. Hannah and me, we put off having Bill until we were late-thirties for the sake of our careers. Bill and his wife Meg, they must have both been gone fifty when they had these two. Not that they were worn out—in another age, they'd have passed for thirty—but old is old is old.

The flyers circle in the great blue dome above the bay, clear silver eggs with the rainbow flicker of improbably tiny wings; the crickets chirp

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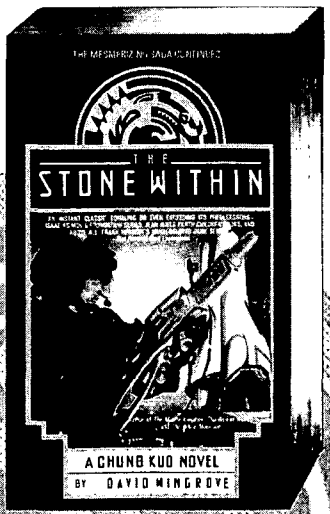

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amid the myrtled rocks; the yachts catch the breeze. I'd like to say something serious to Saul and Agatha as we sit out here on the patio, to try to find out what's really going on between them and Bill, and maybe even make an attempt at repair. But instead, we start to talk about holidays. I ask them if they really have been to the Sea of Tranquillity, to the moon.

"Do you want to see?"

"I'd love to."

Saul dives back into the house. Without actually thinking—nearly a century out of date—I'm expecting him to return with a wad of photos in an envelope. But he returns with this box, a little VR thing with tiny rows of user-defined touchpads. He holds it out toward me, but I shake my head.

"You'd better do it, Saul."

So he slips two cool wires over my ears, presses another against the side of my nose and drops the box onto the rug that covers my lap. He touches a button. As yet, nothing happens.

"Papa, can you hear me?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Can you see?"

I nod without thinking, but all I'm getting is the stepped green lawns of my overly neat garden, the sea unfolding the horizon. Plain old actual reality.

Then, Blam!

Saul says, "This is us coming in on the moonshuttle."

I'm flying over black and white craters. The stars are sliding overhead. I'm falling through the teeth of airless mountains. I'm tumbling toward a silver city of spires and domes.

"And this is Lunar Park."

Blam! A midnight jungle strung with lights. Looking up without my willing it through incredible foliage and the geodome, I see the distant Earth; a tiny blue globe.

"Remember, Ag? That party."

From somewhere, Agatha chuckles. "And you in that getup."

Faces. Dancing. Gleaming bodies. Parakeet colors. Someone leaps ten, fifteen feet into the air. I shudder as a hand touches me. I smell Agatha's scent, hear her saying something that's drowned in music. I can't tell whether she's in VR or on the patio.

"This goes on for ages. You know, Papa, fun at the time, but . . . I'll run it forward."

I hear myself say, "Thanks."

Then, Blam! I'm lying on my back on the patio. The deckchair is tipped over beside me.

"You're okay? Papa?"

Agatha's leaning down over me out of the sky. Strands of hair almost touching my face, the fall of her breasts against her white cotton blouse.

"You sort of rolled off your chair. . . ."

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I nod, pushing up on my old elbows, feeling the flush of stupid embarrassment, the jolt on my back and arse and the promise of a truly spectacular bruise. Black. Crimson. Purple. Like God smiling down through tropical clouds.

Agatha's helping me as I rise. I'm still a little dizzy, and I'm gulping back the urge to be sick. For a moment, as the endorphins advance and re-group in my bloodstream, I even get a glimpse beyond the veil at the messages my body is really trying to send. I almost feel *pain*, for Chrissake. I blink slowly, willing it to recede. I can see the patio paving in shadow and sunlight. I can see the cracked, fallen box of the little VR machine.

"Hey, don't worry."

Strong arms place me back in my deckchair. I lick my lips and swallow, swallow, swallow. No, I won't be sick.

"Are you okay? You . . ."

"I'm fine. Is that thing repairable? Can I have a look?"

Saul immediately gives the VR box back to me, which makes me certain it's irretrievably busted. I lift the cracked lid. Inside, it's mostly empty space. Just a few silver hairs reaching to a superconductor ring in the middle.

"These machines are incredible, aren't they?" I find myself muttering.

"Papa, they turn out this kind of crap by the million now. They make them fragile 'cos they want them to break so you go out and buy another. It's no big deal. Do you want to go inside? Maybe it's a bit hot for you out here."

Before I can think of an answer, I'm being helped back inside the house. I'm laid on the sofa in the cool and the dark, with the doors closed and the shutters down, propped up on cushions like a doll. Part of me hates this, but the sensation of being cared for by humans instead of machines is too nice for me to protest.

I close my eyes. After a few seconds of red darkness, my corneas automatically blank themselves out. The first time they did this, I'd expected a sensation of deep, ultimate black. But for me at least—and Doc Fanian tells me it's different for all of his patients—white is the color of absence. Like a snowfield on a dead planet. Aching white. Like hospital sheets in the moment before you go under.

"Papa?"

"What time is it?"

I open my eyes. An instant later, my vision returns.

"You've been asleep."

I try to sit up. With ease, Agatha holds me down. A tissue appears. She wipes some drool from off my chin. The clock in the room says seven. Nearly twilight. No need to blink; my eardrums are still on. Through the open patio doors comes the sound of the tide breaking on the rocks, but I'm also picking up a strange buzzing. I tilt my head like a dog. I look around for a fly. Could it be that I've blinked without realizing and

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reconfigured my eardrums in some odd way? Then movement catches my eye. A black-and-silver thing hardly bigger than an pinhead whirs past my nose, and I see that Saul's busy controlling it with a palette he's got on his lap at the far end of the sofa. Some new game.

I slide my legs down off the sofa. I'm sitting up, and suddenly feeling almost normal. Sleeping in the afternoon usually leaves me feeling ten years older—like a corpse—but this particular sleep has actually done me some good. The nausea's gone. Agatha's kneeling beside me, and Saul's playing with his toy. I'm bright-eyed, bushy tailed. I feel like a ninety-year-old.

I say, "I was speaking this morning to Antonio."

"Antonio, Papa?" Agatha's forehead crinkles with puzzlement.

"He's a man in a shop," I say. "I mean, you don't know him. He runs a bakery in the port."

"Anyway, Papa," Agatha prompts sweetly, "what were you saying to him?"

"I told him that you were staying—my grandchildren—and he asked how old you were. The thing is, I wasn't quite sure."

"Can't you guess?"

I gaze at her. Why do she and Saul always want to turn everything into a game?

"I'm sorry, Papa," she relents. "I shouldn't tease. I'm twenty-eight and a half now, and Saul's thirty-two and three-quarters."

"Seven eighths," Saul says without taking his eyes off the buzzing pinhead as it circles close to the open windows. "And you'd better not forget my birthday." The pinhead zooms back across the room. "I mean you, Ag. Not Papa. Papa never forgets. . . ."

The pinhead buzzes close to Agatha, brushing strands of her hair, almost touching her nose. "Look, Saul," she snaps, standing up, stamping her foot. "Can't you turn that bloody thing off?"

Saul smiles and shakes his head. Agatha reaches up to grab it, but Saul's too quick. He whisks it away. It loops the loop. She's giggling now, and Saul's shoulders are shaking with mirth as she dashes after it across the room.

Nodding, smiling palely, I watch my grandchildren at play.

"What is that thing, anyway?" I ask as they finally start to tire.

"It's a metacam, Papa." Saul touches a control. The pinhead stops dead in the middle of the room. Slowly turning, catching the pale evening light on facets of silver, it hovers, waiting for a new command. "We're just pissing around."

Agatha flops down in a chair. She says, "Papa, it's the latest thing. Don't say you haven't seen them on the news?"

I shake my head. Even on the old flatscreen TV I keep in the corner, everything nowadays comes across like a rock music video. And the endless good news just doesn't feel *right* to me, raised as I was on a diet of war and starving Africans.

"What does it do?" I ask.

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"Well," Saul says, "this metacam shows the effects of multiple waveform collapse. Look . . ." Saul shuffles toward me down the length of the sofa, the palette still on his lap. "That buzzing thing up there is a multilens, and I simply control it from down here—"

"—that's amazing." I say. "When I was young they used to have pocket camcorders you couldn't even get in your pocket. Not unless you had one made specially. The pockets, I mean. Not the cameras. . . ."

Saul keeps smiling through my digression. "But it's not *just* a camera, Papa, and anyway you could get ones this size fifteen years ago." He touches the palette on his lap, and suddenly a well of brightness tunnels down from it, seemingly right through and into the floor. Then the brightness resolves into an image. "You see? There's Agatha."

I nod. And there, indeed, she is: three-dee on the palette screen on Saul's lap. Agatha. Prettier than a picture.

I watch Agatha on the palette as she gets up from the chair. She strolls over to the windows. The pinhead lens drifts after her, panning. I'm fascinated. Perhaps it's my new corneas, but she seems clearer in the image than she does in reality.

Humming to herself, Agatha starts plucking the pink rose petals from a display on the windowledge, letting them fall to the floor. As I watch her on Saul's palette screen, I notice the odd way that the petals seem to drift from her fingers, how they multiply and divide. Some even rise and dance, seemingly caught on a breeze although the air in the room is still, leaving fading trails behind them. Then Agatha's face blurs as she turns and smiles. But she's also still in profile, looking out of the window. Eyes and a mouth at both angles at once. Then she takes a step forward, while at the same time remaining still. At first, the effect of these overlays is attractive, like a portrait by Picasso, but as they build up, the palette becomes confused. Saul touches the palette edge. Agatha collapses back into one image again. She's looking out through the window into the twilight at the big yacht with white sails at anchor out in the bay. The same Agatha I see as I look up toward her.

"Isn't that something?" Saul says.

I can only nod.

"Yes, incredible, isn't it?" Agatha says, brushing pollen from her fingers. "The metacam's showing possible universes that lie close to our own. You do understand that, Papa?"

"Yes. But . . ."

Agatha comes over and kisses the age-mottled top of my head.

Outside, beyond the patio and the velvety neat garden, the sea horizon has dissolved. The big white-sailed yacht now seems to be floating with the early stars. I can't even tell whether it's an illusion.

"We thought we'd go out on our own this evening, Papa," she murmurs, her lips ticklingly close to my ear. "See what's going on down in the port. That is, if you're feeling okay. You don't mind us leaving for a few hours, do you?"

* * *

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A flyer from the port comes to collect Saul and Agatha. I stand waving on the patio as they rise into the starry darkness like silver twins of the moon.

Back inside the house, even with all the lights on, everything feels empty. I find myself wondering what it will be like after my grandchildren have gone entirely, which can only be a matter of days. I fix some food in the kitchen. Usually, I like the sense of control that my old culinary tools give me, but the buzzing of the molecular knife seems to fill my bones as I cut, slice, arrange. Saul and Agatha. Everything about them means happiness, but still I have this stupid idea that there's a price to pay.

I sit down at the kitchen table, gazing at green-bellied mussels, bits of squid swimming in oil, bread that's already going stale. What came over me this morning, buying all this crap? I stand up, pushing my way through the furniture to get outside. There. The stars, the moon, the faint lights of the port set down in the scoop of the darkly gleaming coast. If I really knew how to configure these eardrums, I could probably filter out everything but distant laughter in those lantern-strung streets, music, the clink of glasses. I could eavesdrop on what Saul and Agatha are saying about Papa as they sit at some café table, whether they think I've gone downhill since the last time, or whether, all things considered, I'm holding up pretty well.

They'll be taking clues from things around this house that I don't even notice. I remember visiting a great aunt back in the last century when I was only a kid. She was always punctilious about her appearance, but as she got older she used to cake her face with white powder, and there was some terrible discovery my mother made when she looked through the old newspapers in the front room. Soon after that, auntie was taken into what was euphemistically called a Home. These days, you can keep your own company for much longer. There are machines that will do most things for you: I've already got one in my bedside drawer that crawls down my leg and cuts my toenails for me. But when do you finally cross that line of not coping? And who will warn you when you get close?

Unaided, I climb down from the patio and hobble along the pathways of my stepped garden. Since Bill decided that I wasn't up to maintaining it any longer and bought me a mec-cultivator, I really only wander out here at night. I've always been a raggedy kind of gardener, and this place is now far too neat for me. You could putt on the neat little lawns, and the borders are a lesson in geometry. So I generally make do with darkness, the secret touch of the leaves, the scents of hidden blooms. I haven't seen the mec-cultivator for several days now anyway, although it's obviously still keeping busy, trundling along with its silver arms and prettily painted panels, searching endlessly for weeds, collecting seedheads, snipping at stray fingers of ivy. We avoid each other, it and I. In its prim determination—even in the flower displays that it delivers to the house when I'm not looking—it reminds me of Bill. He tries so hard, does Bill. He's a worrier in an age when people have given up

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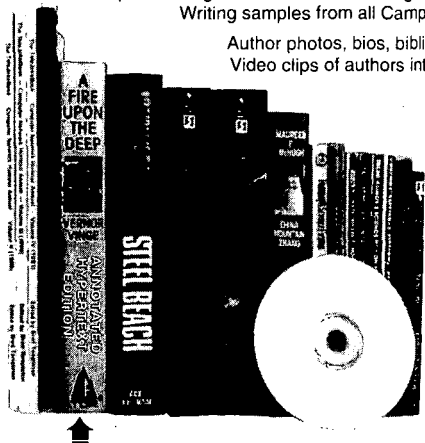

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worrying. And he's a carer, too. I know that. And I love my son. I truly love him. I just wish that Hannah was alive to love him with me. I wish that she was walking the streets of the port, buying dresses from the stalls down by the harbor. I just wish that things were a little different.

I sit down on the wall. It's hard to remember for sure now whether things were ever that happy for me. I must go back to times late in the last century when I was with Hannah, and everything was so much less easy then. We all thought the world was ending, for a start. Everything we did had a kind of twilit intensity. Of course, I was lucky; I worked in engineering construction—all those Newtonian equations that are now routinely demolished—at a time when rivers were being diverted, flood barriers erected, seas tamed. I had money and I had opportunity. But if you spend your life thinking Lucky, Lucky, Lucky, you're really simply waiting for a fall. I remember the agonies Hannah and I went through before we decided to have Bill. We talked on and on about the wars, the heat, the continents of skeleton bodies. But we finally decided as parents always do that love and hope is enough. And we made love as though we meant it, and Bill was born, and the money—at least for us—kept on coming in through the endless recessions. There were even inklings of the ways that things would get better. I remember TV programs where academics tried to describe the golden horizons that lay ahead—how unraveling the edges of possibility and time promised predictive intelligence, unlimited energy. Hannah and I were better equipped than most to understand, but we were still puzzled, confused. And we knew enough about history to recognize the parallels between all this quantum magic and the fiasco of nuclear power, which must once have seemed equally promising, and equally incomprehensible.

But this time the physicists had got it largely right. Bill must have been ten by the time the good news began to outweigh the bad, and he was still drawing pictures of burnt-out rainforest, although by then he was using a paintbox PC to do it. I remember that I was a little amazed at his steady aura of gloom. But I thought that perhaps he just needed time to change and adjust to a world that was undeniably getting better, and perhaps he would have done so, become like Saul and Agatha—a child of the bright new age—if Hannah hadn't died.

I totter back through the garden, across the patio and into the house. Feeling like a voyeur, I peek into Saul and Agatha's bedroom. They've been here—what?—less than a day, and already it looks deeply lived in, and smells like a gym. Odd socks and bedsheets and tissues are strewn across the floor, along with food wrappers (does that mean I'm not feeding them enough?), shoes, the torn pages of the in-flight shuttle magazine, the softly glowing sheet of whatever book Agatha's reading. I gaze at it, but of course it's not a book, but another game; Agatha's probably never read a book in her life. Whatever the thing is, I feel giddy just looking at it. Like falling down a prismatic well.

Putting the thing down again exactly where I found it, I notice that they've broken the top off the vase on the dresser, and then pushed the

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shards back into place. It's a thing that Hannah bought from one of those shops that used to sell Third World goods at First World prices; when there was a Third and First World. Thick blue glaze, decorated with unlikely looking birds. I used to hate that vase, until Hannah died, and then the things we squabbled over became achingly sweet. Saul and Agatha'll probably tell me about breaking it when they find the right moment. Or perhaps they think Papa'll never notice. But I don't mind. I really don't care. Saul and Agatha can break anything they want, smash up this whole fucking house. I almost wish they would, in fact, or at least leave some lasting impression. This place is filled with the stuff of a lifetime, but now it seems empty. How I envy my grandchildren this dreadfully messy room, the way they manage to fill up so much space from those little bags and with all the life they bring with them. If only I could program my vacuum cleaner not to tidy it all up into oblivion as soon as they go, I'd leave it this way forever.

Saul's stuffed the metacam back into the top of his traveling bag on the floor. I can see the white corner of the palette sticking out, and part of me wants to take a good look, maybe even turn it on and try to work out if he really meant that stuff about showing alternate realities. But I go cold at the thought of dropping or breaking it—it's obviously his current favorite toy—and my hands are trembling slightly even as I think of the possibilities, of half worlds beside our own. I see an image: me bending over the metacam as it lies smashed on the tiled floor. Would the metacam record its own destruction? Does it really matter?

I leave the room, close the door. Then I open it to check that I've left things as they were. I close the door again, then I pull it back ajar, as I found it.

I go to my room, wash, and then the bedhelper trundles out and lifts me into bed, even though I could have managed it on my own. I blink three times to turn off my eardrums. Then I close my eyes.

Sleep on demand isn't an option that Doc Fanian's been able to offer me yet. When I've mentioned to him how long the nights can seem—and conversely how easily I drop without willing it in the middle of the afternoon—he gives me a look that suggests that he's heard the same thing from thousands of other elderly patients on this island. I'm sure a solution to these empty hours will be found eventually, but helping the old has never been a primary aim of technology. We're flotsam at the edge of the great ocean of life. We have to make do with spin-offs as the waves push us further and further up the beach.

But no sleep. No sleep. Just silence and whiteness. If I wasn't so tired, I'd pursue the age-old remedy and get up and actually do something. It would be better, at least, to think happy thoughts of this happy day. But Saul and Agatha evade me. Somehow, they're still too close to be real. Memory needs distance, understanding. That's what sleep's for, but as you get older, you *want* sleep, but you don't need it. I turn over in shimmering endless whiteness. I find myself thinking of gadgets, of driftwood spindrift spinoffs. Endless broken gadgets on a white infinite shore.

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Their cracked lids and flailing wires. If only I could kneel, bend, pick them up and come to some kind of understanding. If only these bones would allow.

There was a time when I could work the latest Japanese gadget straight out of the box. I was a master. VCR two-year-event timers, graphic equalizers, PCs and photocopiers, the eight-speaker stereo in the car. Even those fancy camcorders were no problem, although somehow the results were always disappointing. I remember Hannah walking down a frosty lane, glancing back toward me with the bare winter trees behind her, smiling though grey clouds of breath. And Hannah in some park with boats on a lake, holding baby Bill up for me as I crouched with my eye pressed to the viewfinder. I used to play those tapes late at night after she died when Bill was asleep up in his room. I'd run them backward, forward, freeze-frame. I'd run them even though she wasn't quite the Hannah I remembered, even though she always looked stiff and uneasy when a lens was pointed at her. I had them re-recorded when the formats changed. Then the formats changed again. Things were re-digitized. Converted into solid-state. Into superconductor rings. Somewhere along the way, I lost touch with the technology.

In the morning, the door to the room where my grandchildren are sleeping is closed. After persuading my front door to open, and for some stubborn reason deciding not to put on my autolegs, I hobble out into the sunlight and start to descend the steps at the side of my house unaided. Hand over rickety hand.

It's another clear and perfect morning. I can see the snow-gleam of the mainland peaks through a cleft in the island hills, and my neighbors the Euthons are heading out on their habitual morning jog. They wave, and I wave back. What's left of their greying hair is tucked into headbands as though it might get in the way.

The Euthons sometimes invite me to their house for drinks, and, although he's shown it to me many times before, Mr. Euthon always demonstrates his holographic hi-fi, playing Mozart at volume levels that the great genius himself can probably hear far across the warm seas and the green rolling continents in his unmarked grave. I suspect that the Euthons' real interest in me lies simply in the fascination that the old have for the truly ancient—like gazing at a signpost: this is the way things will lead. But they're still sprightly enough, barely past one hundred. One morning last summer, I looked out and saw the Euthons chasing each other naked around their swimming pool. Their sagging arms and breasts and bellies flapped like featherless wings. Mrs. Euthon was shrieking like a schoolgirl and Mr. Euthon had a glistening pink erection. I wish them luck. They're living this happy, golden age.

I reach the bottom of the steps and catch my breath. Parked in the shadow of my house, my old Ford is dented, splattered with dust and dew. I only ever take it on the short drive to and from the port nowadays, but the roads grow worse by the season, and extract an increasingly

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heavy price. Who'd have thought the road surfaces would be allowed to get this bad, this far into the future? People generally use flyers now, and what land vehicles there are have predictive suspension; they'll give you a magic carpet ride over any kind of terrain. Me and my old car, we're too old to be even an anachronism.

I lift up the hood and gaze inside, breathing the smell of oil and dirt. Ah, good old-fashioned engineering. V8 cylinders. Sparkplugs leading to distributor caps. Rust holes in the wheel arch. I learnt about cars on chilly northern mornings, bit by bit as things refused to work. I can still remember most of it more easily than what I had for lunch yesterday.

A flock of white doves clatter up and circle east, out over the silken sea toward the lime groves on the headland. Bowed down beneath the hood, my fingers trace oiled dirt, and I find myself wishing that the old girl actually needed fixing. But over the years, as bits and pieces have given out and fallen away, the people at the workshop in the port have connected in new devices. I'm still not sure that I believe them when they tell me that until they are introduced into the car's system, every device is actually the same. To me, that sounds like the kind of baloney you give to someone who's too stupid to understand. But the new bits soon get oiled-over nicely enough anyway, and after a while they even start to look like the old bits they've replaced. It's like my own body, all the new odds and ends that Doc Fanian's put in. Eardrums, corneas, a liver, hips, a heart, joints too numerous to mention. Endless chemical implants to make up for all the things I should be manufacturing naturally. Little nano-creatures that clean and repair the walls of my arteries. Stuff to keep back the pain. After a while, you start to wonder just how much of something you have to replace before it to ceases to be what it is.

"Fixing something, Papa?"

I look up with a start, nearly cracking my head on the underside of the hood.

Agatha.

"I mean, your hands look filthy." She stares at them, these gnarled old tree roots that Doc Fanian has yet to replace. A little amazed. She's in the same blouse she wore yesterday. Her hair's done up with a ribbon.

"Just fiddling around."

"You must give me and Saul a ride."

"I'd love to."

"Did you hear us come back last night, Papa? I'm sorry if we were noisy—and it *was* pretty late." Carved out of the gorgeous sunlight, she raises a fist and rubs at sleep-crusted eyes.

"No." I point. "These ears."

"So you probably missed the carnival fireworks as well. But it must be great, being able to turn yourself off and on like that. What *are* they? Re or inter-active?"

I shrug. What can I say . . . ? I can't even hear fireworks—or my own grandchildren coming in drunk. "Did you have a good time last night?"

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"It was nice." She gazes at me, smiling. Nice. She means it. She means everything she says.

I see that she's got wine stains on her blouse, and bits of tomato seed. As she leans over the engine, I gaze at the crown of her head, the pale skin whorled beneath.

"You still miss Grandma, don't you, Papa?" she asks, looking up at me from the engine with oil on the tip of her nose.

"It's all in the past," I say, fiddling for the catch, pulling the hood back down with a rusty bang.

Agatha gives me a hand as I climb the steps to the front of the house. I lean heavily on her, wondering how I'll ever manage alone.

I drive Saul and Agatha down to the beach. They rattle around in the back of my Ford, whooping and laughing. And I'm grinning broadly too, happy as a kitten as I take the hairpins in and out of sunlight, through cool shadows of forest with the glittering race of water far below. At last! A chance to show that Papa's not past it! In control. The gearshift's automatic, but there's still the steering, the brakes, the choke, the accelerator. My hands and feet shift in a complex dance, ancient and arcane as alchemy.

We crash down the road in clouds of dust. I beep the horn, but people can hear us coming a mile off, anyway. They point and wave. Flyers dip low, their bee-wings blurring, for a better look. The sun shines bright and hot. The trees are dancing green. The sea is shimmering silver. I'm a mad old man, wise as the deep and lovely hills, deeply loved by his deeply lovely grandchildren. And I decide right here and now that I should get out more often. Meet new strangers. See the island, make the most of the future. Live a little while I still can.

"You're okay, Papa?"

On the bench, Agatha presses a button, and a striped parasol unfolds. "If we leave this here, it should keep track of the sun for you."

"Thanks."

"Do you still swim?" She reaches to her waist and pulls off her T-shirt. I do not even glance at her breasts.

Saul's already naked. He stretches out on the white sand beside me. His penis flops out over his thigh; a beached baby whale.

"Do you, Papa? I mean, swim?"

"No," I say. "Not for a few years."

"We could try one of the pedalos later." Agatha steps out from her shorts and underpants. "They're powered. You don't have to pedal unless you want to."

"Sure."

Agatha shakes the ribbon from her hair and scampers off down the beach, kicking up the sand. It's late morning. Surfers are riding the deep green waves. People are laughing, splashing, swimming, drifting on the

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tide in huge transparent bubbles. And on the beach there are sun-worshippers and runners, kids making sandcastles, robot vendors selling ice cream.

"Ag and Dad are a real problem," Saul says, lying back, his eyes closed against the sun.

I glance down at him. "You're going to see him. . . . ?"

He pulls a face. "It's a duty to see Mum and Dad, you know? It's not like coming here to see you, Papa."

"No."

"You know what they're like."

"Yes," I say, wondering why I even bother with the lie.

Of course, when Hannah died, everyone seemed to assume a deepening closeness would develop between father and son. Everyone, that is, apart from anyone who knew anything about grief or bereavement. Bill was eleven then, and when I looked up from the breakfast table one morning, he was twelve, then thirteen. He was finding his own views, starting to seek independence. He kept himself busy, he did well at school. We went on daytrips together and took foreign holidays. We talked amicably, we visited Mum's grave at Christmas and on her birthday and walked through the damp grass back to the car keeping our separate silences. Sometimes, we'd talk animatedly about things that didn't matter. But we never argued. When he was seventeen, Bill went to college in another town. When he was twenty, he took a job in another country. He wrote and rang dutifully, but the gaps got bigger. Even with tri-dee and the revolutions of instantaneous communication, it got harder and harder to know what to say. And Bill married Meg, and Meg was like him, only more so: a child of that generation. Respectful, hardworking, discreet, always ready to say the right thing. I think they both dealt in currency and commodities for people who couldn't be bothered to handle their own affairs. I was never quite sure. And Meg was always just a face and a name. Of course, their two kids—when they finally got around to having them—were wildly different. I loved them deeply, richly. I loved them without doubt or question. For a while, when Saul and Agatha were still children and I didn't yet need these autolegs to get around, I used to visit Bill and Meg regularly.

Agatha runs back up the beach from her swim. She lies down and lets the sun dry her shining body. Then it's time for the picnic, and to my relief, they both put some clothes back on. I don't recognize most of the food they spread out on the matting. New flavors, new textures. I certainly didn't buy any of it yesterday on my trip to the port. But anyway, it's delicious, as lovely as this day.

"Did you do this in the last century, Papa?" Saul asks. "I mean, have picnics on the beach?"

I shrug Yes and No. "Yes," I say eventually, "But there was a problem if you sat out too long. A problem with the sky."

"The *sky?*"

Saul reaches across the mat to re-stack his plate with something sweet

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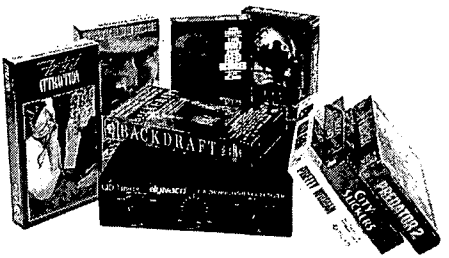

As much as I love renting videos, it's just not the same as seeing a movie in a theater. The first time I saw *Top Gun* I nearly jumped out of my seat when the planes flew overhead. One of the reasons movies seem so real is because they use surround sound to make it seem like you're actually there. An incredible new device makes your stereo receiver get that same surround sound in your home.

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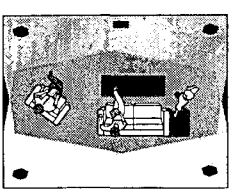

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and crusty that's probably as good for you and unfattening as fresh air. He doesn't say it, but still I can tell that he's wondering how we ever managed to get ourselves into such a mess back then, how anyone could possibly mess up something as fundamental as the sky.

Afterward, Saul produces his metacam palette from one of the bags. It unfolds. The little pinhead buzzes up, winking in the light.

"The sand here isn't a problem?" I ask.

"Sand?"

"I mean . . . getting into the mechanism."

"Oh, no."

From the corner of my eye, I see Agatha raising her eyebrows. Then she plumps her cushion and lies down in the sun. She's humming again. Her eyes are closed. I'm wondering if there isn't some music going on inside her head that I can't even hear.

"You were saying yesterday, Saul," I persist, "that it's more than a camera. . . . "

"Well," Saul looks up at me, and blanks the palette, weighing up just how much he can tell Papa that Papa would understand. "You know about quantum technology, Papa, and the unified field?"

I nod encouragingly.

He tells me anyway. "What it means is that for every event, there are a massive number of possibilities."

Again, I nod.

"What happens, you see, Papa, is that you push artificial intelligence along the quantum shift to observe these fractionally different worlds, to make the waveform collapse. That's where we get all the world's energy from nowadays, from the gradient of that minute difference. And that's how this palette works. It displays some of the worlds that lie close beside our own. Then it projects them forward. A kind of animation. Like predictive suspension, only much more advanced. . . . "

I nod, already losing touch. And that's only the beginning. His explanation carries on, grows more involved. I keep on nodding. After all, I do know a little about quantum magic. But it's all hypothetical, technical stuff; electrons and positrons. It's got nothing to do with real different worlds, has it?

"So it really *is* showing things that might have happened?" I ask when he's finally finished. "It really isn't a trick?"

Saul glances down at his palette, then back up at me, looking slightly offended. The pinhead lens hangs motionless in the air between us, totally ignoring the breeze. "No," he says. "It's not a trick, Papa."

Saul shows me the palette: he even lets me rest the thing on my lap. I gaze down, and watch the worlds divide.

The waves tumble, falling and breaking over the sand in big glassy lumps. The wind lifts the flags along the shore in a thousand different ways. The sky shivers. A seagull flies over, mewing, breaking into a starburst of wings. Grey comet-tailed things that might be ghosts, people,

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or—for all I know—the product of my own addled and enhanced senses, blur by across the shore.

"You've got implant corneas, haven't you, Papa?" Saul says. "I could probably rig things up so you could have the metacam projected directly into your eyes."

"No thanks," I say.

Probably remembering what happened to the VR, Saul doesn't push it.

I look down in wonder. "This is . . ."

What? Incredible? Impossible? Unreal?

"This is . . ."

Saul touches the palette screen again. He cancels out the breaking, shattering waves. And Agatha calls the vendor for an ice cream, and somehow it's a shock when she pushes the cool cone into my hand. I have to hold it well out of the way, careful not to drip over the palette.

"This is . . ."

And my ice creams falls, splattering Saul's arm.

Agatha leans over. "Here, let me. I'll turn that off, Papa."

"Yes, do."

There's nothing left on the palette now, anyway. Just a drop of ice cream, and the wide empty beach. The screen blanks at Agatha's touch, and the pinhead camera shoots down from a sky that suddenly seems much darker, cooler. Immense purple-grey clouds are billowing over the sea. The yachts and the flyers are turning for home. Agatha and Saul begin to pack our stuff away.

"I'll drive the car home, Papa," Agatha says, helping me from the deckchair just as I feel the first heavy drops of rain.

"But . . ."

They take an arm each. They half-carry me across the sand and up the slope to the end of the beach road where I've parked—badly I now see—the Ford.

"But . . ."

They put me down, and unhesitatingly unfold the Ford's complex hood. They help me in.

"But . . ."

They wind up the windows and turn on the headlights just as the first grey veils strike the shore. The wipers flap, the rain drums. Even though she's never driven before in her life, Agatha spins the Ford's wheel and shoots uphill through the thickening mud, crashing through the puddles toward the hairpin.

Nestled against Saul in the back seat, too tired to complain, I fall asleep.

That evening, we go dancing. Saul. Agatha. Papa.

There are faces. Gleaming bodies. Parakeet colors. Looking through the rooftops of the port into the dark sky, I can see the moon. I'm vaguely disappointed to find that she's so full tonight. Since I've had these corneas

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fitted, and with the air nowadays so clear, I can often make out the lights of the new settlements when she's hooded in shadow.

Agatha leans over the café table. She's humming some indefinable tune. "What are you looking at, Papa?"

"The moon."

She gazes up herself, and the moon settles in the pools of her eyes. She blinks and half-smiles. I can tell that Agatha really does see mystery up there. She's sat in the bars, slept in the hotels, hired dust buggies and gone crater-climbing. Yet she still feels the mystery.

"You've never been up there, have you, Papa?"

"I've never left the Earth."

"There's always time," she says.

"Time for what?"

She laughs, shaking her head.

Music is playing. Wine is flowing. The port is beautiful in daylight, but even more so under these lanterns, these stars, this moon, on this warm summer night. Someone grabs Saul and pulls him out to join the dance that fills the square. Agatha remains sitting by me. They're sweet, considerate kids. One of them always stays at Papa's side.

"Do you know what kind of work Bill does these days?" I ask Agatha—a clumsy attempt both to satisfy my curiosity, and to raise the subject of Bill and Meg.

"He works the markets, Papa. Like always. He sells commodities."

"But if he deals in things," I say, genuinely if only vaguely puzzled, "that must mean there isn't enough of everything . . . ?" But perhaps it's another part of the game. If everything was available in unlimited supply, there would be no fun left, would there? Nothing to save up for. No sense of anticipation or pleasurable denial. But then, how come Bill takes it all so seriously? What's he trying to prove?

Agatha shrugs So What? at my question anyway. She really doesn't understand these things herself, and cares even less. Then someone pulls her up into the dance, and Saul takes her place beside me. The moment is lost. Saul's tapping his feet. Smiling at Agatha as her bright skirt swirls. No metacam tonight, no Picasso faces. She doesn't dissolve or clap her hands, burst into laughter or tears, or walk back singing to the table. But it's hard not to keep thinking of all those tumbling possibilities. Where does it end? Is there a different Papa for every moment, even one that sprawls dying right now on these slick cobbles as blood pumps out from fragile arteries into his brain? And is there another one, far across the barricades of time, that sits here with Saul as Agatha swirls and dances, with Hannah still at his side?

I reach for my wine glass and swallow, swallow. Hannah's dead—but what if one cell, one strand of double helix, one atom had been different . . . ? Or perhaps if Hannah had been less of an optimist? What if she hadn't ignored those tiny symptoms, those minor niggles, if she'd worried and gone straight to the doctor and had the tests? Or if it had happened later, just five or ten years later, when there was a guaranteed cure . . . ?

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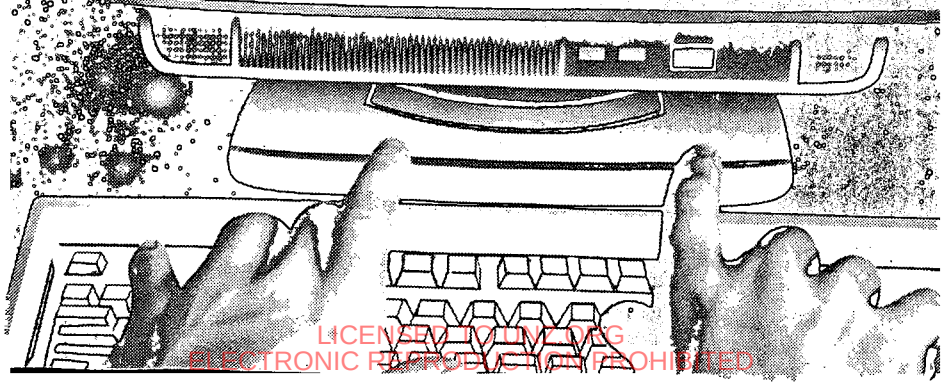

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But still—and despite the metacam—I'm convinced that there's only one real universe. All the rest is hocus pocus, the flicker of an atom, quantum magic. And, after all, it seems churlish to complain about a world where so many things have finally worked out right. . . .

"Penny for them."

"What?"

"Your thoughts." Saul pours out more wine. "It's a phrase."

"Oh yes." My head is starting to fizz. I drink the wine. "It's an old one. I know it."

The music stops. Agatha claps, her hands raised, her face shining. The crowd pushes by. Time for drinks, conversation. Looking across the cleared space of the square, down the shadowed street leading to the harbor, I see a grey-haired woman walking toward us. I blink twice, slowly, waiting for her to disappear. But my ears pick up the clip of her shoes over the voices and the re-tuning of the band. She's smiling. She knows us. She waves. As my heart trampolines on my stomach, she crosses the square and pulls a seat over to our table.

"May I?"

Agatha and Saul nod Yes. They're always happy to meet new people. Me, I'm staring. She's not Hannah, of course. Not Hannah.

"Remember?" She asks me, tucking her dress under her legs as she sits down. "I helped carry your bags to that car of yours. I've seen it once or twice in the square. I've always wondered who drove it."

"It's Papa's pride and joy," Agatha says, her chest heaving from the dance.

The woman leans forward across the table, smiling. Her skin is soft, plump, downy as a peach.

I point to Saul. "My grandson here's got this device. He tells me it projects other possible worlds—"

"—Oh, you mean a metacam." She turns to Saul. "What model?"

Saul tells her. The woman who isn't Hannah nods, spreads her hands, sticks out her chin a little. It's not the choice she'd have made, but . . .

"More wine, Papa?"

I nod. Agatha pours.

I watch the woman with grey hair. Eyes that aren't Hannah's color, a disappointing droop to her nose that she probably keeps that way out of inverted vanity. I try to follow her and Saul's conversation as the music starts up again, waiting for her to turn back toward me, waiting for the point where I can butt in. It doesn't come, and I drink my wine.

Somewhere there seems to be a mirror—or perhaps it's just a possible mirror in some other world, or my own blurred imagination—and I see the woman whose name I didn't catch sitting there, and I can see me, Papa. Propped at an off-center angle against the arms of a chair. Fat belly and long thin limbs, disturbingly pale eyes and a slack mouth surrounded by drapes of ancient skin. A face you can see right through to the skull beneath.

Not-Hannah laughs at something Saul says. Their lips move, their

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hands touch, but I can't hear any longer. I've been blinking too much—I may even have been crying—and I've somehow turned my eardrums off. In silence, Not-Hannah catches Saul's strong young arms and pulls him up to dance. They settle easily into the beat and the sway. His hand nestles in the small of her back. She twirls in his arms, easy as thistledown. I blink, and drink more wine, and the sound crashes in again. I blink again. It's there. It's gone. Breaking like the tide. What am I doing here anyway, spoiling the fun of the able, the happy, the young?

This party will go on, all the dancing and the laughing, until a doomsday that'll never come. These people, they'll live forever. They'll warm up the sun, they'll stop the universe from final collapse, or maybe they'll simply relive each glorious moment as the universe turns back on itself and time reverses, party with the dinosaurs, resurrect the dead, dance until everything ends with the biggest of all possible bangs.

"Are you all right, Papa?"

"I'm fine."

I pour out more of the wine.

It slops over the table.

Saul's sitting at the table again with Not-Hannah, and the spillage dribbles over Not-Hannah's dress. I say fuck it, never mind, spilling more as I try to catch the flow, and I've really given the two of them the perfect excuse to go off together so he can help her to clean up. Yes, help to lift off her dress even though she's old enough to be his—

But then, who cares? Fun is fun is fun is fun. Or maybe it's Agatha she was after. Or both, or neither. It doesn't matter, does it? After all, my grandchildren have got each other. Call me old-fashioned, but look at them. My own bloody grandchildren. Look at them. Creatures from another fucking planet—

But Not-Hannah's gone off on her own anyway. Maybe it was something I said, but my eardrums are off—I can't even hear my own words, which is probably a good thing. Saul and Agatha are staring at me. Looking worried. Their lips are saying something about Papa and Bed and Home, and there's a huge red firework flashing over the moon. Or perhaps it's a warning cursor, which was one of things Doc Fanian told me to look out for if there was ever a problem. My body is fitted with all sorts of systems and alarms, which my flesh and veins happily embrace. It's just this brain that's become a little wild, a little estranged, swimming like a pale fish in its bowl of liquid and bone. So why not fit a few new extra pieces, get rid of the last of the old grey meat? And I'd be new, I'd be perfect—

Whiteness. Whiteness. No light. No darkness.

"Are you in there, Papa?"

Doc Fanian's voice.

"Where else would I be?"

I open my eyes. Everything becomes clear. Tiger-stripes of sunlight across the walls of my bedroom. The silver mantis limbs of my bedhelper.

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The smell of my own skin like sour ancient leather. Memories of the night before. "What have you done to me?"

"Nothing at all."

I blink and swallow. I stop myself from blinking again. Doc Fanian's in beach shorts and a bright, ridiculous shirt; his usual attire for a consultation.

"Did you know," I say, "that they've installed a big red neon sign just above the moon that says Please Stop Drinking Alcohol?"

"So the cursor *did* work!" Doc Fanian looks pleased with himself. His boyish features crinkle. "Then I suppose you passed out?"

"Not long after. I thought it was just the drink."

"It's a safety circuit. Of course, the body has got one too, but it's less reliable at your age."

"I haven't even got a hangover."

"The filters will have seen to that."

Doc Fanian gazes around my bedroom. There's a photo of Hannah on the far wall. She's hugging her knees as she sits on a grassy bank with nothing but sky behind her; a time and place I can't even remember. He peers at it, but says nothing. He's probably had a good mooch around the whole house by now, looking for signs, seeing how Papa's managing. Which is exactly why I normally make a point of visiting him at the surgery. I never used to be afraid of doctors when I was fitter, younger. But I am now. Now that I need them. . . .

"Your grandchildren called me in. They were worried. It's understandable, although there was really no cause. None at all." There's a faint tone of irritation in Doc Fanian's voice. He's annoyed that anyone should doubt his professional handiwork, or think that Papa's systems might have been so casually set up that a few glasses of wine would cause any difficulty.

"Well, thanks."

"It's no problem." He smiles. He starts humming again. He forgives easily. "If you'd care to pop into the surgery in the next week or two, there's some new stuff I'd like to show you. It's a kind of short-term memory enhancement. You know—it helps if you forget things you've been doing recently."

I say nothing, wondering what Doc Fanian has encountered around the house to make him come up with this suggestion.

"Where are Saul and Agatha?"

"Just next door. Packing."

"*Packing?*"

"Anyway." He smiles. "I really must be going. I'd like to stay for breakfast, but . . ."

"Maybe some other universe, eh?"

He turns and gazes back at me for a moment. He understands more about me than I do myself, but still he looks puzzled.

"Yes," he nods. Half-smiling. Humoring an old man. "Take care, you hear?"

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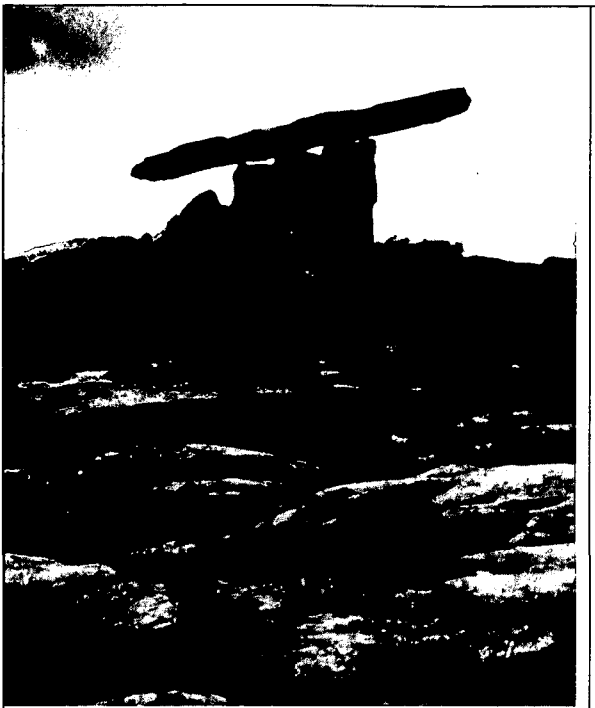

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He leaves the door open behind him. I can hear Saul and Agatha. Laughing, squabbling. Packing.

I shift myself up. The bedhelper trundles out and offers arms for me to grab. I'm standing when Saul comes into the room.

"I'm sorry about getting the doc out, Papa. We just thought, you know. . . ."

"Why are you packing? You're not off already, are you?"

He smiles. "Remember, Papa? We're off to the Amazon. We told you on the beach yesterday."

I nod.

"But it's been great, Papa. It really has."

"I'm sorry about last night. I behaved like an idiot."

"Yes." He claps his hands on my bony shoulders and laughs outright. "That was quite something." He shakes his head in admiration. Papa, a party animal! "You really did cut loose, didn't you?"

Agatha fixes breakfast. The fridge is filled with all kinds of stuff I've never even heard of. They've re-stocked it from somewhere, and now it looks like the horn of plenty. I sit watching my lovely granddaughter as she moves around, humming.

Cooking smells. The sigh of the sea wafts through the open window. Another perfect day. The way I feel about her and Saul leaving, I could have done with grey torrents of rain. But even in paradise you can't have everything.

"So," I say, "you're off to the Amazon."

"Yeah." She bangs the plates down on the table. "There are freshwater dolphins. Giant anteaters. People living the way their ancestors did, now the rainforest has been restored." She smiles, looking as dreamy as last night when she gazed at the moon. I can see her standing in the magical darkness of a forest floor, naked as a priestess, her skin striped with green and mahogany shadows. It requires no imagination at all."It'll be fun," she says.

"Then you won't be visiting Bill and Meg for a while?"

She bangs out more food. "There's plenty of time. We'll get there eventually. And I wish we'd talked more here, Papa, to be honest. There are so many things I want to ask."

"About Grandma?" I ask. Making an easy guess.

"You too, Papa. All those years after she died. I mean, between then and now. You'll have to tell me what happened."

I open my mouth, hoping it will fill up with some comment. But nothing comes out. All those years: how could I have lived through so many without even noticing? My life is divided as geologists divide up the rock crust of Earth's time: those huge empty spaces of rock without life, and a narrow band which seems to contain everything. And Saul and Agatha are leaving, and time—that most precious commodity of all—has passed me by. Again.

Agatha sits down on a stool and leans forward, brown arms resting on

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her brown thighs. For a moment, I think that she's not going to press the point. But she says, "Do tell me about Grandma, Papa. It's one of those things Dad won't talk about."

"What do you want to know?"

"I know this is awkward, but . . . how did she die?"

"Bill's never told you?"

"We figured that perhaps he was too young at the time to know. But he wasn't, was he? We worked that out."

"Bill was eleven when your Gram died." I say. I know why she's asking me this now: she's getting Papa's story before it's too late. But I'm not offended. She has a right to know. "We tried to keep a lot of stuff about Hannah's death away from Bill. Perhaps that was a mistake, but that was what we both decided."

"It was a disease called cancer, wasn't it?"

So she does know something after all. Perhaps Bill's told her more than she's admitting. Perhaps she's checking up, comparing versions. But, seeing her innocent, questioning face, I know that the thought is unjust.

"Yes," I say, "it was cancer. They could cure a great many forms of the disease even then. They could probably have cured Hannah if she'd gone and had the tests a few months earlier."

"I'm sorry, Papa. It must have been awful."

I stare at my lovely granddaughter. Another new century will soon be turning, and I'm deep into the future; further than I'd ever imagined. Has Agatha ever even known anyone who's died? And pain, what does she know about pain? And who am I, like the last bloody guest at the Masque of the Red Death, to reveal it to her now?

What *does* she want to know, anyway—how good or bad would she like me to make it? Does she want me to tell her that, six months after the first diagnosis, Hannah was dead? Or that she spent her last days in hospital even though she'd have liked to have passed away at home—but the sight of her in her final stages distressed little Bill too much? It distressed me, too. It distressed *her*. Her skin was covered in ulcers from the treatment that the doctors had insisted on giving, stretched tight over bone and fluid-distended tissue.

"It was all over with fairly quickly," I say."And it was long ago."

My ears catch a noise behind me. I turn. Saul's standing leaning in the kitchen doorway, his arms folded, his head bowed. He's been listening, too. And both my grandchildren look sad, almost as if they've heard all the things I haven't been able to tell them.

Now Saul comes and puts his arm around my shoulder. "Poor Papa." Agatha comes over too. I bury my face into them, trembling a little. But life must go on, and I pull away. I don't want to spoil their visit by crying. But I cry anyway. And they draw me back into their warmth, and the tears come sweet as rain.

Then we sit together, and eat breakfast. I feel shaky and clean. For a few moments, the present seems as real as the past.

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"That car of yours," Saul says, waving his fork, swapping subjects with the ease of youth. "I was thinking, Papa, do you know if there's any way of getting another one?"

I'm almost tempted to let him have the Ford. But then, what would that leave me with? "There used to be huge dumps of them everywhere," I say.

"Then I'll come back here to the island and get one, and get all that incredible stuff you've had done in that workshop down in the port. I mean," he chuckles, "I don't want to have to stop for gas."

Gas. When did I last buy *gas?* Years ago, for sure. Yet the old Ford still rattles along.

"Anyway," Agatha says, standing up, her plate empty although I've hardly even started on mine. "I'll finish packing."

I sit with Saul as he finishes his food, feeling hugely un-hungry, yet envying his gusto. He pushes the plate back, glances around for some kitchen machine that isn't there to take it, then pulls a face.

"Papa, I nearly forgot. I said I'd fix that console of yours."

I nod. The engaged flag that prevented him and Agatha getting through to me before they arrived must still be on: the thing that stops people from ringing.

Saul's as good as his word. As Agatha sings some wordless melody in their room, he goes through some of the simpler options on the console with me. I nod, trying hard to concentrate. And Hannah holds her knees and smiles down at us from the photo on the wall. Saul doesn't seem to notice her gaze. I'm tempted to ask for his help with other things in the house. Ways to reprogram the mec-gardener and the vacuum, ways to make the place feel more like my own. But I know that I'll never remember his instructions. All I really want is for him to stay talking to me for a few moments longer.

"So you're okay about that, Papa?"

"I'm fine."

He turns away and shouts, "Hey, Ag!"

After that, everything takes only a moment. Suddenly, they're standing together in the hall, their bags packed. *Venice. Paris. New York. The Sea of Tranquillity.* Ready to go.

"We thought we'd walk down to the port, Papa. Just catch whatever ferry is going. It's such a lovely day."

"And thanks, Papa. Thanks for everything."

"Yes."

I'm hugged first by one, then the other. After the tears before breakfast. I now feel astonishingly dry-eyed.

"Well. . . ."

"Yes. . . ."

I gaze at Saul and Agatha, my beautiful grandchildren. Still trying to take them in. The future stretches before us and between us.

They open the door. They head off hand-in-hand down the cypressed road. "Bye, Papa. We love you."

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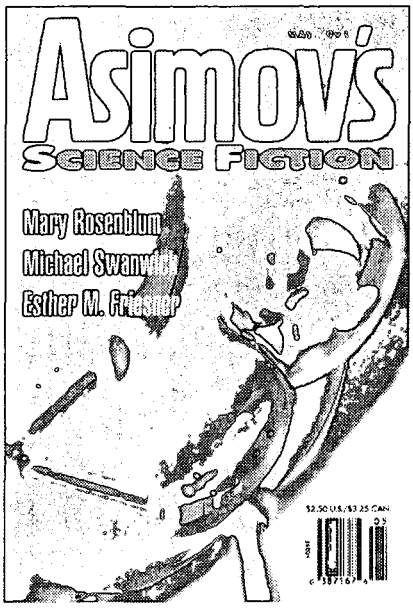

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I stand there, feeling the sunlight on my face. Watching them go. My front door starts to bleep. I ignore it. In the shadow of my house, beside my old Ford, I see there's a limp-winged flyer; Saul and Agatha must have used it last night to get me home. I don't know how to work these things. I have no idea how I'll get rid of it.

Saul and Agatha turn again and wave before they vanish around the curve in the road. I wave back.

Then I'm inside. The door is closed. The house is silent.

I head for Saul and Agatha's room.

They've stripped the beds and made a reasonable attempt at clearing up, but still I can almost feel my vacuum cleaner itching to get in and finish the job. Agatha's left the dressing gown she borrowed on the bed. I lift it up to my face. Soap and sea salt—a deeper undertow like forest thyme. Her scent will last a few hours, and after that I suppose I'll still have the memory of her every time I put it on. The vase that Hannah bought all those years ago still sits on top of the dressing table: they never did get around to telling me that they broke the thing. I lift it up, turning the glazed weight in my hands to inspect the damage. But the cracks, the shards, have vanished. The vase is whole and perfect again—as perfect, at least, as it ever was. In a panic, almost dropping the thing, I gaze around the room, wondering what else I've forgotten or imagined. But it's still there, the fading sense of my grandchildren's presence. A forgotten sock, torn pages of the shuttle magazine. I put the vase gently down again. When so many other things are possible, I suppose there's bound to be a cheaply available gadget that heals china.

Feeling oddly expectant, I look under the beds. There's dust that the vacuum cleaner will soon clear away. The greased blue inner wrapper of something I don't understand. A few crumpled tissues. And, of course, Saul's taken the metacam with him. He would; it's his favorite toy. The wonderful promise of those controls, and the green menus that floated like pond lilies on the screen. REVISE. CREATE. EDIT. CHANGE. And Agatha turning. CHANGE. Agatha standing still. REVISE. Ghost-petals drifting up from her hands, and a white yacht floating with the stars on the horizon. If you could change the past, if you could alter, if you could amend . . .?

But I'd always known in my heart that the dream is just a dream, and that a toy is still just a toy. Perhaps one day, it'll be possible to revisit the pharaohs, or return to the hot sweet sheets of first love. But that lies far ahead, much further even than the nearest stars that the first big ships will soon be reaching. Far beyond my own lifetime.

The broken VR machine sticks out from the top of the wastebin by the window. I take it out, wrapping the wires around the case, still wondering if there is any way to fix it. Once upon a time, VR was seen as a way out from the troubles of the world. But nobody bothers much with it any longer. It was my generation that couldn't do anything without recording it on whatever new medium the Japanese had come up with. Saul and

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Agatha aren't like that. They're not afraid of losing the past. They're not afraid of living in the present. They're not afraid of finding the future.

I stand for a moment, clawing at the sensation of their fading presence, dragging in breath after breath. Then the console starts to bleep along the corridor in my bedroom, and the front doorbell sounds. I stumble toward it, light-headed with joy. They're back! They've changed their minds! There isn't a ferry until tomorrow! I can't believe . . .

The door flashes USER NOT RECOGNIZED at me. Eventually, I manage to get it open.

"You *are* in. I thought . . ."

I stand there, momentarily dumbstruck. The pretty, grey-haired woman from yesterday evening at the café gazes at me.

"They're gone," I say.

"Who? Oh, your grandchildren. They're taking a ferry this morning, aren't they? Off to Brazil or someplace." She smiles and shakes her head. The wildnesses of youth. "Anyway," she points, "that's my flyer. Rather than try to call it in, I thought I'd walk over here and collect it." She glances back at the blue sea, the blue sky, this gorgeous island. She breathes it all in deeply. "Such a lovely day."

"Would you like to come in?"

"Well, just for a moment."

"I'm afraid I was a little drunk last night. . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I had a fine time."

I glance over, looking for sarcasm. But of course she means it. People always do.

I burrow into my hugely overstocked fridge. When I emerge with a tray, she's sitting gazing at the blank screen of my old TV.

"You know," she says, "I haven't seen one of those in years. We didn't have one at home, of course. But my grandparents did."

I put down the tray and rummage in my pocket. "This," I say, waving the broken VR machine in my gnarled hand. "Is it possible to get it fixed?"

"Let me see." She takes it from me, lifts the cracked lid. "Oh, I should think so, unless the coil's been broken. Of course, it would be cheaper to go out and buy a new one, but I take it that you've memories in here that you'd like to keep?"

I pocket the VR machine like some dirty secret, and pour out the coffee. I sit down. We look at each other, this woman and I. How old is she, anyway? These days, it's often hard to tell. Somewhere between Bill and the Euthons, I suppose, which makes her thirty or even forty years younger than me. And, even if she were more like Hannah, she isn't the way Hannah would be if she were alive. Hannah would be like me, staggering on ancient limbs, confused, trying to communicate through senses that are no longer her own, dragged ever-forward into the unheeding future, scrabbling desperately to get back to the past, clawing at those bright rare days when the grandchildren come to visit, feeling the golden grit of precious moments slipping though her fingers even before they are gone.

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And time doesn't matter to this woman; or to anyone under a hundred. That's one of the reasons it's so hard for me to keep track. The seasons on this island change, but people just gaze and admire. They pick the fruit as it falls. They breathe the salt wind from off the grey winter ocean and shiver happily, knowing they'll sit eating toast by the fire as soon as they get home.

"I don't live that far from here," the woman says eventually. "I mean, if there's anything that you'd like help with. If there's anything that needs doing."

I gaze back at her, trying not to feel offended. I know, after all, that I probably do need help of some kind or other. I just can't think of what it is.

"Or we could just talk," she adds hopefully.

"Do you remember fast food? McDonalds?"

She shakes her head.

"ET? Pee-Wee Herman? Global warming? Ethnic cleansing? Dan Quayle?"

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. . . ."

She lifts her coffee from the table, drinking it quickly.

The silence falls between us like snow.

I stand in my doorway, watching as her flyer rises and turns, its tiny wings flashing in sunlight. A final wave, and I close the door, knowing that Saul and Agatha will probably be on a ferry now. Off this island.

I head toward my bedroom. Assuming it's time for my morning rest, my bedhelper clicks out its arms expectantly. I glare at it, but of course it doesn't understand, and I've already forgotten the trick Saul showed me that you could do to disable it. The house is already back to its old ways, taking charge, cleaning up Saul and Agatha's room, getting rid of every sign of life.

But I did at least make an effort with the console, and I do know now how to make sure the engaged flag isn't showing. Child's play, really—and I always knew how to call my son Bill's number. Which is what I do now.

Of all places, Bill's in London. The precise location shows up on the console before he appears; it was just a question of making the right demand, of touching the right key. Then there's a pause.

I have to wait.

It's almost as if the console is testing my resolve, although I know that Bill's probably having to put someone else on hold so he can speak to me. And that he'll imagine there's a minor crisis brewing—otherwise, why would Papa bother to ring?

But I wait anyway, and, as I do, I rehearse the words I'll have to say, although I know that they'll come out differently. But while there's still time, I'll do my best to bridge the years.

At least, I'll start to try. ●

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FRANKENFOOD

My love, consider neobroccoli:
fleshy, blooming like a green brain,
flushed with vitamin E.

Even as we kiss,
mitochondria,
the furnaces in our cells,
spew free radicals.
This promiscuous toxic oxygen
ravels the DNA
which makes us what we are.
When our genes wrinkle, we age.
If they forget, we die.
Someday your mind could topple;
my body might betray your secrets.

Or perhaps a designer carrot,
fibrous, bright, erect,
so rich in beta-carotene?

The biotechs have discovered
the fountain of youth;
limon juice seeps from it.
They say antioxidants
—vitamins C and E,
beta-carotene—
can rout the free radicals
and stop us from growing old.
We must be conservative as chromosomes.
If we can win our war with oxygen,
nothing between us need ever change.

So if you love me, take this apple,
pink, moist, sweet as sin,
and taste of immortality.

—James Patrick Kelly

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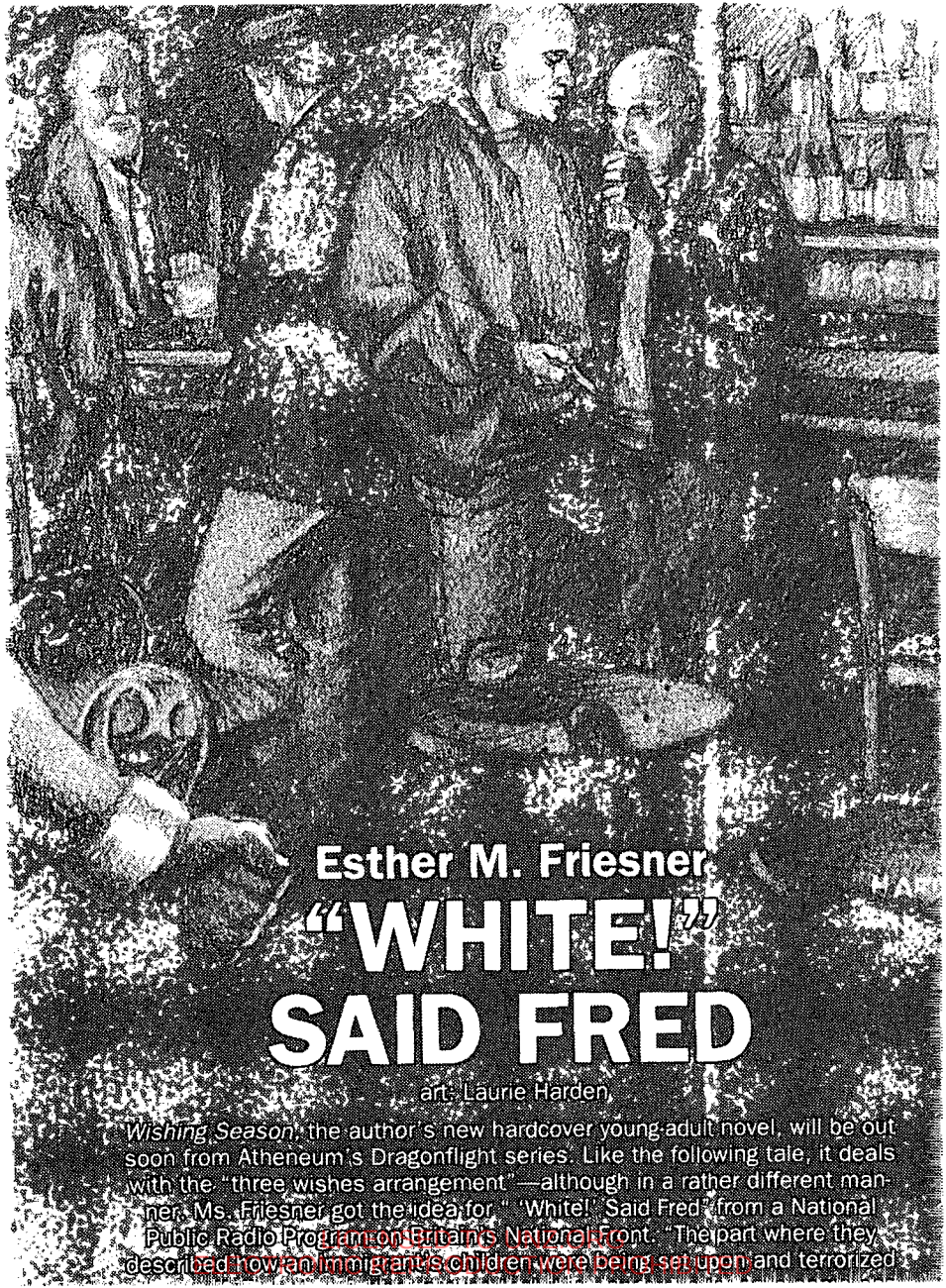

Esther M. Friesner

"WHITE!" SAID FRED

art: Laurie Harden

Wishing Season, the author's new hardcover young-adult novel, will be out soon from Atheneum's Dragonflight series. Like the following tale, it deals with the "three wishes arrangement"—although in a rather different manner. Ms. Friesner got the idea for "'White!' Said Fred" from a National Public Radio Program on Britain's National Front. "The part where they described how an immigrant's children were being set upon and terrorized

Nigel and his chums were giving the unconscious Paki a few last kicks for luck when they heard a voice cry, "Oi!"

"Wossit, Nigel?" Fred asked, leaning back against the alley wall to catch his breath. He was a weedy thing when lined up next to his mates, but he owned the best pair of Doc Martens in the bunch. You couldn't get any real efficient kicking done without a decent pair of DMs on your feet.

"Woss wot?" Nigel replied, still hammering on the Paki's ribcage. "I didn't say nuffin'."

"Me neever," said Bert. He stepped back and added, "Leave off, Nije, 'snot like 'e's feelin' the benefits no more."

"Oi!"

"There it goes again!" Fred made it sound like an accusation. His eyes darted from side to side, rats in a box. "You think it's the cops?"

"Nar," said Bert. " 'Ave a lookabout. Ain't no woodentops come by this way on patrol 'til later. You knows 'at."

"Well, if it ain't you two, and it ain't the cops, and there ain't no one else around as I can see, and it sure as 'ouses ain't *'im*—" Fred pointed at the Paki "—then 'oo the fuck said 'oi'?"

"*I* did," said the Paki's back pocket.

Nigel and Bert jumped in their bovver boots and leaped for the relative safety of Fred's chosen alley wall. They felt better with something at their backs, especially when a bloody foreigner who by rights should be half dead and fully unconscious started talking from places decent white folks never did.

The pocket sighed. " 'Ere, don't tell me you lot've scarpered?" Nigel nudged Bert and Bert nudged Fred, but no one responded. The silence seemed to annoy the voice in the pocket. "Oh, *bugger!*" it exploded. "Gone an' run out on a mate again, just 'cos 'e's in a bind. Stupid tadgers!"

" 'Ere!" Nigel objected. " 'Oo're you calling a tadger, you—you—'aberdashery bit!" He left the shelter of the wall and strode back to the prostrate Paki. "Show yourself, if you're 'arf a man!"

The voice chuckled. "If I *could* show meself, that'd be the battle won, mate. But if it's face-to-face you want, reach in this sooty's pocket and yank the bottle."

Nigel scratched his shorn scalp, perplexed. He prided himself on never taking orders from anyone with a face he could bash. Here was no face, just a voice telling him what to do. He decided to do it and hope for a bashable face to show up later.

The bottle was cold silver, hammered into a pattern of interlaced nubile maidens performing outrageous contortions for their mutual delight. The lads gathered around to examine this *objet d'art* in what little light seeped through to the back of the narrow alley.

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" 'Ow's she do *that* wifout them bristols getting inna way?" Bert wanted to know. He reached for the bottle, firmly in Nigel's possession. He got a full-face shoveaway for his answer.

"Let a feller out an' I'll do better'n *tell* you," the bottle said, quivering in Nigel's grip. "Pull the stopper, there's good lads."

Nigel made ready to comply without demur, but Fred clapped his hand over his chief's and asked, "You think you otter? I mean, you don't rightly know woss likely to 'appen if you *do*, do you, now?"

"Cobblers," Nigel sneered, giving Fred a thump on the head with the bottle. "I know woss gonna 'appen right enough! A bloody *genie's* gonna 'appen, thass wot! Ain't you got no edgy-cayshun? Genie's wot *always* comes otter bottles wot talks to folk. Bloody fuckwit."

He wasted no more time, but yanked the cork—a cork sheathed in silver and capped with a shimmering black opal, true—and stood back, awaiting a stream of strange-colored smoke, a clap of thunder, or any of the many different dramatic effects that always heralded a genie's appearance in the stories.

"Oi," said a voice behind him, and someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Nigel spun around, ready for a fight. He threw the first punch, still clutching the bottle, and found his hand engulfed in a fist as big as a rugby ball and twice as leathery. A sensible man would weigh the situation and back down, but this was Nigel. Instinct took over. He lowered his head, ready to give his unlucky assailant a Glasgow kiss—they weren't in Glasgow and it wasn't a gesture of affection, and it didn't even involve lips (headbutts don't, unless you do them wrong), but the irony of it all was wasted on Nigel. All he knew was one fast clonk of his shaven skull to this yobbo's chin and it would be all over.

Nigel heard voices in a dream.

"Nigel? You awake yet?"

"Arr, 'e'll be orright, Fred. Don't be such a nana. Go on, drink yer pint an' lay off 'im."

Nigel blinked. Everything looked and sounded fuzzy and smelled of stale tobacco and beer. He shook his head slowly, still blinking, until things came into focus.

The first thing he really heard was Bert saying, "—so then this Paki stops the bloke an' asks 'im, 'Wossit you mean, walkin' up an' down this bridge singin' *It's twenty-four an' a beautiful day?'* An' the bloke grabs that little wog, tips 'im over the bridge inter the water, an' goes on 'is way singin' 'Oh, it's twenty-*five* an' a beautiful day!' " Nigel's ears rang painfully with the ensuing laughter.

He looked around and recognized where he was. It was the *Crown and Garter* public house, a small establishment not far from his (quite literal)

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stomping grounds. The lads had somehow dragged him in here and propped him up in a corner seat with a pint of bitter awaiting him on the table.

"Well, well, well, look 'oo's back among the living!"

Nigel saw a blond, bare-chested, blue-eyed man who dwarfed him and Bert put together. (Fred was too big a gonk to enter the equation.) He sat across the table from Nigel, pint in hand, and seemed to take up half the pub, when in truth he only occupied two of its chairs. " 'Oo the fuck are *you?*" Nigel demanded.

The man laughed, showing off horsey white teeth interspaced with gold fangs. " 'Oo'm *I?* I'm yer bloody fairy godmomma, you great wanker! 'Oo d'you *think* I am?"

" 'E's the genie, Nije," Fred said meekly. "Name of Doug. 'Ere to grant us a wish 'cos 'e's so bloody grateful we got him otter that bottle."

"Wot sort o' name's *Doug* for a genie?" Nigel roared.

"It's the one I *got,*" the genie replied affably. He drained his pint, leaned across the table and helped himself to Fred's. Fred gave a muted squawk of outrage. "Shut yer gob, thickie," Doug said, and turned him into a newt. "Now, any more t' say 'bout an honest genie's given name?" he asked the survivors.

Nigel flicked the newt off the table with a snap of his fingers. It hit the wall and turned into Fred again. The other patrons of the *Crown and Garter* observed this transformation with the detachment of the overworked and weary who prefer to mind their own business and get home again in one piece in time to watch "Coronation Street."

"Orright, then, Doug it is." Nigel was pleased to be gracious. "Fer me first wish, I'll 'ave the crown jools delivered to me flat, fer me second I'll 'ave—"

"Ballocks!" said Doug. "Listen, you cack-'anded charlie, I'm not just *any* bloody genie! Take a grolley at me if you don't believe it."

Nigel studied the genie, rubbing his stubbly chin in thought. "Bugger all if you ain't right! T'ones I allus seen in the story books looked like a bunch o' rag-'eads."

"Sambos, the lot of 'em," Doug agreed. "You think it was easy, an honest workin' man like meself lumped in wif *that* lazy crew all these centuries? Passed down through the ages, 'and to 'and, from one wog t' the next, always 'avin' t' grant 'em the same bloody three wishes—" He sighed and grabbed Nigel's untouched pint. "But them's the rules."

"Well," Bert opined, "it must be a mercy to finally 'ave some white folks t' grant them wishes to."

"Codswallop." The genie demolished Nigel's drink at a gulp. "It's three bloody wishes each time I'm set free, is all I can grant! First time in *ages*

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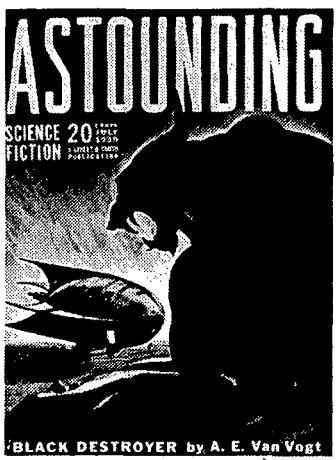

Critics mark this issue as the first "great" issue edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. It contains the first published story, "Black Destroyer," by A.E. van Vogt and the first story by Isaac Asimov to be published in **ASTOUNDING.**

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I've got some decent lads t' serve, 'stead o' them pissin' Pakis, and there's nowt but one wish each I can give the lot of you!"

Nigel was so touched by the poor genie's plight that he didn't even object to losing his drink. He just waited until Fred bought himself another and then nicked it. Fred gave him a look, but that was all Fred had the balls to give anyone, when he wasn't acting with the gang. He went back to buy himself a replacement.

By the time Fred returned, Nigel had had ample opportunity to think. He swallowed the last of his beer, wiped his mouth on the back of a hand hairier than his smooth-trimmed skull, and announced, "Doug, old wodge, it seems t' me you've been sent to us as a sort o' Providence, like. You an' me an' Bert an' even nitty ol' Fred 'ere, wot we is is we're all victims of the *system.*"

There was a chorus of agreement from the membership, although in this case it was shouts of *Bloody right!* instead of *Here! Here!*

"It's the fuckin' *system* woss took decent jobs away from honest men like us an' give 'em to a bunch o' bloody *foreigners* woss thicker'n fleas on a dog's bum," Nigel went on. "And you mark my words, woss done to *us* plain lads is just woss been done to this poor ol' genie, just 'cos 'e's not no bloody groid!"

"Too right." Doug looked hangdog. " 'Snot like any of woss happened's been *your* fault, eh?"

"You said it," Nigel concurred. "When there wasn't no black faces elbowing in on a man in this country, *them* was the days!"

A pall of nostalgia fell over the party. And there it might have remained until Doomsday or closing time had not the genie heaved a sigh like a toddler typhoon and said:

"Cor, *wot* a grateful country this'd be to the bloke woss got the pills t' turn it back *around,* eh, lads?"

Later, Nigel claimed it was his idea, which gave him the right to tell the others exactly how they were going to do it.

"Awwww, Nije, I wanted t' use my wish for a girl woss a real goer," Fred whined.

"Stuff it, you pillock. If we pull this off right, you won't be able t' get no sleep wossever 'counter all the thankful little pieces wot'll gob-job you to death, a'most."

Fred had the big, sad eyes of a horny basset hound. "You really think so?"

"I know so," Nigel reassured him. "Look, it's simple: You makes your wish first, an' you wishes for things to be set right, like, fer all us honest white folks woss made this country wot she is."

" 'At's not fair," Fred protested. " 'Ere I'll go an' spring me one an' only

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wish on making this a bleedin' pair o' dice for *you* lot, an' then you'll still 'ave *yer* wishes free an' clear!"

"Fred," said Nigel, throwing a chummy arm around his companion's neck. "Fred, Fred, Fred," he said, drawing that arm in tighter, until Fred's Adam's apple was nearly reduced to sauce. "Ain't yer ma never read you no nice little books o' fairy tales, like?"

Fred tried to reply, but lacked the air to do so.

"See, in them stories," Nigel went on, "it's the genie's bounden dooty to grant three wishes, but 'e can't bloody well 'elp it if the wishes wot gets made is *stoopid,* now can 'e?"

"*Khkhkhkhk!*" said Fred.

"Right," Nigel agreed. "See, in this one story, these two old gumbies gets three wishes, only th' 'usband wastes 'is first wishin' up a sossidge fer 'is tea."

"Yeh!" Bert chimed in. "I knows that'n. So 'is missus starts chunterin' on about wot 'e wished for 'til 'e loses 'is temper an' says, 'I wish that sossidge was stuck on the end of yer nose!' "

"So *then*—" Nigel grabbed the ball for the final goal "—'e 'ad to waste 'is last wish on gettin' that sossidge off 'er nose, an' there they was, up shit creek an' on the dole 'til their dyin' day!"

Fred made a sound that might have been pity for the impoverished old couple. It was hard to tell.

"So *that's* why we're 'avin' you wish first—seein' as 'ow you're even stoopider'n good ol' Bert, 'ere. Ain't I right, Bert?"

Bert nodded enthusiastically.

"That way," Nigel went on in a reasonable tone, "if you fucks up yer wish good an' proper, we've still got us two more chances t' get it right."

"An' if you doesn't fuck it up—" Bert's voice as good as added *Fat chance!* "—you gets all the credit for savin' England from a fate worse'n death! 'Ow's that?"

Nigel removed his armlock in time for his captive to croak, "You mean in case I gets a sossidge stuck on me own nose?" His companions smiled. "Fair enough."

Doug the genie pounded Fred on the back. "There's the spirit! Now wish away, lad, and don't be scared. There's two spare wishes waitin' to save yer hide if you gets it wrong. Ah! But if you gets it *right* . . . "

The genie waved one hand, and a crystal ball appeared in his palm. Inside the glassy sphere a host of naked ladies danced attendance on a hypothetical Fred, enthroned in glory, a pint measure in either hand, a lissome blond wench at his feet doing incredible things. (Although perhaps the single most incredible thing was that the Fred in the tableau didn't spill a drop of beer, no matter how energetic the blond's attentions became.)

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"You mean if I gets it right, I gets *'er?*" Fred asked.

"Nothing ain't too good for the man wot makes it so's we're livin' wif our *own* kind at last!" Doug declared.

"Our own kind. . . . Yeh, that sounds good t' me. I wish—I wish—" Fred closed his eyes tight, crossed his fingers, and shouted, "Oh, 'ow I *do* wish I was livin' just among white folks!"

"Comin' right up," said Doug.

"Ain't you genies 'sposed t' say somefing like *'Earkening and obedience?*" the educated Nigel asked.

"Wotever gets the job done, mate. Now naff off," said Doug. He snapped his fingers and Fred vanished.

"Oo," said Bert, staring into the crystal ball. "Why don't they got no *noses,* eh?"

Nigel gave him an elbow jab to the ribs. " 'At's 'cos they're bloody lepers, innit?"

"*Leopards?*" Bert's voice scaled up with wonder.

"Yeah, right enough," Doug averred. "That's a first class leper colony off on a nice little Pacific isle, it is. Don't hardly find 'em like *that* no more."

Bert scowled. "Wot'd you want to drop poor ol' Fred, wot never done you no 'arm, in the middle of a bunch o' leopards?"

"Stick it, spod. 'E asked to be livin' among white folks an' I *give* it to 'im."

"Mmmmmmm, they *looks* white enough," Bert admitted.

Doug made a helpless gesture. "I only grant wishes, mates, I can't change 'em. Them's the rules. 'Oose fault is it if 'e didn't 'ave the sense to ask for what 'e wanted so's a magical bloke could understand it? Done's done. So which one o' you'll be the one t' save 'im?"

"Wot? An' waste me *own* wish?" Bert was incensed.

" 'Sides," Nigel put in, " 'snot like we otter bring 'im back after where *'e's* been. Could be 'e's contagious, like."

"Fred allus did say as 'ow 'e wanted to travel an' meet new folk," Bert added.

" 'Ave it your own way, lads." The genie blew on the crystal ball and Fred's pathetic face vanished as the lepers swarmed over him.

"That's enough for me," Bert said. "I'm gonna use me wish fer a squillion pounds, or maybe a big motor, or a—"

Nigel gave him a punch in the head. "An' 'ow long you think you're gonna enjoy it if the country goes on like she's *been,* eh? The bloody system'll get it all away from you an' find a way t' give 'em to some Paki prat, you mark my words!"

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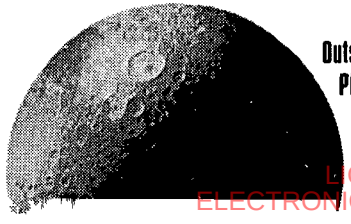

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"It's my wish, innit?" Bert demanded, rubbing the side of his head. "Well, sod the country! Woss the country ever did for *me?*"

Nigel clicked his tongue. "Bert, I'm surpised at you. Where's yer sense o' patriotics?"

"Sod patriotics. I wants a *motor!*"

"Wot, not a woomin?" Nigel asked snidely.

Bert snorted and doled out the received wisdom: "Them wot's got th' good *motors* gets all the best bits o' kilt."

"Look, you prong, we agreed—"

Bert folded his arms. "Changed me mind," he said.

Nigel studied Bert's arms and knew that in a fair fight, the victory could go either way. Not like with poor old Fred. He wrinkled his brow in thought, and the ripples went halfway up the top of his skull.

"Orright," he said. "Pull yer finger out an' *wish* that way, all selfish. But you just remember: *I've still got me own wish left.*"

It was Bert's turn to frown. "Woddyer mean by that?"

"Sossidge," was Nigel's cryptic reply, but it was clue enough for Bert.

"You *wouldn't!*" His face was a study in cold horror.

"Oh, wouldn't I!"

Doug prodded Nigel in the shoulder. "Wouldn't you *wot?*"

"Use me wish to undo *'is*, thass wot!" Nigel wore a smile of triumph. "Maybe *worse'n* undo it. Maybe I'd wish 'e was turned into a Paki hisself. Serve 'im right."

"Nije!" Bert was wounded to the heart's core.

"Well, an' why not? If you're so bloody fond o' the black devils that yer willin' to let yer own country stay saddled wif 'em, maybe you'd be 'appier *bein'* one!"

"Arrr, Nije, you know I 'ate's 'em just as much as you."

"*Prove* it, then!" Nigel snapped.

Bert looked down. "I'm afraid."

"Afraid? Afraid o' wot, you great loony?"

"Wot if—wot if I fucks up me wish too, an' ends up like poor ol' Fred?"

"Is that all?" Nigel patted Bert heartily on the back. "You fucks up, I'm right 'ere t' save you."

Bert gave Nigel a suspicious sideways look. "You didn't save Fred."

"Neever did you. But that was only Fred. This is *us,* Bert. You can trust *us,* can't you?"

Bert considered this. "I 'spose," he said.

" 'Ere, listen t' me. The important fing t' keep in mind when wishin' is that ol' Doug 'ere can only give you wot you *asks* for. So long as you're bleedin' careful wif wot you says you wants, it'll all go pimpsy."

"An' if it don't, you'll 'elp me out?" Bert sounded doubtful.

"Don't be a namby! 'Course I will." To prove his sincereity, Nigel

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bought Bert a pint, and, after this was gone, he urged his mate to wish away. "Arter all, you ain't near so stoopid as was Fred."

"No." It came as a revelation to Bert. "No, I *ain't*, am I? Orright then, 'ere goes: I wish—I wish—"

"Remember, you gets just what you *asks* for!" Nigel cautioned. "It don't 'urt none to be specific, eh? Unless you wants to visit the Pacific, too."

"Not that! I wants t' stay right 'ere in England and I wish—I wish that the only folks as was living 'ere wif me was whi—"

" 'Old it! Best not say 'white,' Bert. Remember wot 'appened to Fred. You otter be *scientific.*"

" 'Owzat?"

"Wish as you want everyone living in England otter be *Caucasian.*" Nigel was proud of himself for remembering that word.

Bert turned surly. "Bugger that! I don't want no more Asians atall. Trouble with Fred was, he didn't say as 'ow the folks should be 'ealthy. Well, I wish I only 'ad to live wif *'ealthy* white people in England an' that's what I mean!"

"Comin' right up," Doug said, and snapped his fingers for the second time.

"They don't *look* white," Nigel commented as he peered into the genie's crystal.

"Well, under the dirt, they're white enough," Doug said. "Even count as bleedin' *Caucasians.*" He turned the last word into sneer enough to make Nigel—for the first time in his life—blush hot with shame over his great burden of education. "An' they're 'ealthy. An' it's England."

"Yeh, but it's England about a million years ago!" Nigel stared into the crystal, watching his old chum slowly approach a group of squat, hairy people. They had been hunkered down around a small campfire up until Bert's sudden appearance. Now they were edging closer to their bewildered visitor, holding an assortment of large sticks and rocks. Their throwing arms looked extremely healthy.

"Bring 'im back, then, shall I?"

"Orright."

"Well?"

"Well wot?"

"Well, *wish* 'im back!" The genie was impatient.

"Wot! An' waste me last *wish?*" Nigel made a rude noise.

"I thought as 'e was your mate."

"Wossat got t' do wif it? If I wishes 'im back, we're back where we *started,* wif England in the shit 'counter all them Pakis! 'Sides—" he cast another glance at the crystal "—I got faith in Bert. 'E can make friends anywheres 'e goes."

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Almost anywhere. Bert smiled and raised both hands in the universally accepted gesture that means "I come in peace." The antediluvian Englishmen made a unilateral decision *not* to understand it, based on the premise that the universe was wrong and they were right. (The prehistoric precursor of driving on the left side of the road, perhaps.) Bert was still grinning when the first rock smashed in the front of his head.

The genie sighed. "Too late t' bovver brinin' 'im back *now*. Oh well. No use cryin' over spilled grey matter, I always say." He drew a discreet curtain of mist over the bloody scene in the crystal, then turned to Nigel. "Ready to make your wish, lad?"

Nigel bobbed his head eagerly. "I'm goin' to wish for a squillion pounds, or a nice little tottie wif big bristols, or a—"

" 'Ere!" Doug drew himself up to his full height. Being a genie, that meant he suddenly swelled from a six-foot-tall specimen of over-muscled manhood to a veritable Aryan Godzilla whose crewcut head brushed the rafters of the *Crown and Garter*. "Wot about all that you lot was goin' t' do to get them darkies otter Blighty?"

"Sod *that,*" said Nigel, echoing the late Bert's philosophy. "Wot if I gets it wrong, too? 'Oo's gonter 'elp me out, eh? Not *you,* I wager!"

Doug shrugged. "I can't, like to or not. But if you uses your wish *right*—"

"An' if I *don't?* Bert an' Fred, they was stoopid. No *foresight,* like, that was their trouble. But me, I likes t' look ahead, an' lookin' ahead I sees that I'd do best to take me wish, make me pile and let th' country take its chances."

"*So be it!*"

A change came over Doug, a change most awful, most dramatic, most terrifying. The genie's pale skin, blue eyes, and fair hair all darkened. His crewcut sprouted in some places, withdrew into the scalp in others, until his deeply bronzed skull was shaved clean except for a long black topknot. A pointed beard and trailing moustaches spilled from his face in hirsute profusion. His eyes assumed a tilted angle and an unnerving glint of scorn.

"Behold, it is even as the sages decreed!" Doug's voice rumbled through the public house like thunder. A few of the regulars gathered up their jackets and hurried out, to beat the incipient storm home. "These colorless worms are an effete and weakling race, cowards all!"

" 'Oo're you callin' a coward?" Nigel demanded, trying not to shake in his seat. "An' wot've you done wif Doug?"

The genie's laughter made plaster dust fall from the ceiling. "Foolish mortal, I *am* Doug! My true name is Daoud ibn Khalil, though I doubt

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your meager linguistic skills will allow you to pronounce such melliflu-ous syllables."

"Wotcher on about? Talk like a white man, you pissing towel'ead!"

"Bah, why bother to lower myself thus? You milk-faced buffoons are beneath contempt, unworthy swine who only seek the gratification of your own pitiful material desires. Give you a pint, a ten pound note, and a female with pendulous udders, and you count yourself blessed!"

"A piece like wot I wants costs a sight more'n ten pounds," Nigel objected.

The genie spat. The blob of supernatural spittle sizzled into purple smoke on the table between them. "I give thanks to the Providence which placed me in this dissipated land. By the laws of magic I am constrained to grant the wishes of whosoever finds and uncorks my bottle. To grant wishes is labor, and labor I despise. Therefore, I always seek to find some way to turn my master's wishes against him. So has it always been, since the time of Solomon."

"So you don't fancy doin' an honest day's work, eh?" Nigel's lip curled. "Ain't that just like a wog!"

Daoud regarded him with disdain. "Better a wog than a witling. Since I have been here, I have known many masters. Of these, not a single one who so proudly vaunts his *whiteness* has managed to phrase a wish so that I had to give him what he truly wanted! Ho, ho! Fully twenty-three of your great *white* minds have gone down in defeat before me in the duel of wills between genie and master, most of them paid-up members of the National Front. And yet never have I been able to avoid granting the wishes of those of your countrymen with more wit than whiteness!"

By this time, the genie's spittle was not the only thing that was steaming. "You sayin' as 'ow Bert an' Fred an' the Front lads an' I don't 'ave the brains of a *wog?"* Nigel snarled.

"If the bovver boot fits—"

"Orright, that's *it!"* Nigel slammed both fists onto the table. "I've 'ad it wif you an' all your sooty kin! I'm gonter wish so's you won't 'ave no choice but to give me wot I wants, an' wot *I* wants is gonter boot the 'ole mess o' you gfoids otter 'ere on your black arses!"

Daoud showed all his teeth in an impressive smile. "I would like to see you try."

"*See?* I'll give you *see!"* Nigel was on his feet and breathing hard. "I'll give you my wish so's you won't be *able* to twist it! I wish it t' be right *'ere* in England, so's there's no plonkin' me down in some godforsaken place like you done wif Fred; I wish it t' be right *now*, so's there's no funny business wif sendin' me back in time like you done wif Bert; I wish folks t' keep their general state o' 'ealth as is—"

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"Another tribute to poor Fred, I assume," the genie drawled. Nigel ignored him.

"—an' I wish *wif* all that, that I never 'ad to see anovver one o' your ugly black or brown or yellow faces again as long as I live!"

"That is your wish?" the genie inquired sweetly.

"Fuckin' *right!*" said Nigel.

"In that case . . . *Hearkening and obedience!*"

And everything went black.

Nigel felt a gentle wind on his face. It brought with it a strange yet familiar odor, one he could not quite place. All he did know was that it was a perfume distinctly lacking in yeasty beer fumes and tobacco smoke, a very un-public-houselike smell. He turned his head this way and that, but he could see nothing.

"Where the fuck *am* I?" he demanded.

The genie's hated voice purred the answer: "As requested, O Master, you are in England."

"When? Th' soddin' Dark Ages?"

"It is, as requested, neither England past nor future, but the very hour in which you made your wish."

"Yeh?" Nigel jerked his head back and forth a few more times and was still unable to place that smell. He also noted that he no longer heard the clink of glasses and the mumble of tired voices. Instead he caught the clank of machinery and the grumble of passing motors. "An' the rest o' wot I wished, then?"

"Granted. By my powers you will never more see another black or brown or yellow face all the days of your life."

Nigel grinned into the dark.

"Or another *white* one," the genie added.

Nigel frowned.

"Hard to *do* that, blind."

Nigel screamed. From somewhere far below a boat's foghorn answered.

"But don't worry," the genie concluded. "You only asked it to last as long as you *lived*. Well wished, O Master!"

Nigel felt a heavily booted foot connect with his backbone. He felt the bones crunch, then cold air rushing past, then the smash of icy water, and then . . . nothing. Eternity lacks impact, but has real staying power.

Simon, Andy, and Bill were shuffling along the nearly deserted bridge when the happily humming Paki bumped into them. They were out of work, out of cash, and out of sorts, but never out of ways to strike up a conversation.

" 'Ey!" said Bill. "Whyn't you watch where yer goin', you bloody monkey?"

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Before the man could reply, Simon cut in. " 'E's one monkey don't need no organ. *Singin'*, 'e was!"

"Singin'?" Andy gave his newfound prey a shove against the railing. "Wotcher singin', you wankin' mongrel?"

"Yeh! Sing fer *us*, then!" Simon's shove turned into a punch halfway there.

"Thass right, sing!" Bill's landed hard enough to bloody the man's nose.

Trembling, their victim complied. It was too bad for him that his audience had such stringent taste in music and such forceful ways of expressing their criticisms.

Standing above the Paki's motionless body a short while later, a still-puzzled Simon repeated, " 'It's twenty-four an' a beautiful day'? Wot kinder song was *that?*"

"Oi!" ●

NEXT ISSUE

Coming to you next month is our November Special Double Issue, an immense double-length issue jammed with stories by today's hottest professionals, as well as stuff by rising new stars, and a few of the Biggest Names ever to work in the field.

First up is Nebula award-winner **Michael Swanwick,** one of our most popular writers, returning next month with a major new novella, our November cover story, "Cold Iron." This is a big, complex, and evocative thriller, full to the brim with dragons, goblins, changelings, and Elves—but handled as you've never seen them handled before, in a way that's grim and bleak and powerful and incandescently strange, with dragons who are forged of living Cold Iron in vast and sinister Factories, and then hardwired to drink your soul.... Fantasy? Science Fiction? Science Fantasy? I suspect that only some new-minted term such as Hard Dickensian Fantasy will come even close to describing it... but once you experience it, you won't forget it. This one is going to cause some talk! The stunning cover is by renowned artist **Keith Parkinson,** and it's a knockout, too.

ALSO IN NOVEMBER: Literary cult-figure and Gonzo King **Neal Barrett, Jr.,** whose last genre book, *The Hereafter Gang,* was hailed by The Washington *Post* as "the Great American Novel," returns with what may be his single best piece of short fiction yet, the uproariously funny, profoundly sad, gritty, gentle, and deeply weird story of a very odd boy named "Cush"; another great Literary Unique, a Hugo, Edgar, and World Fantasy Award-winner, the late **Avram Davidson,** returns with what, sadly, may be the last of his marvelous Jack Limekiller novellas (unless more turn up in his unpublished

(Continued on page 76)

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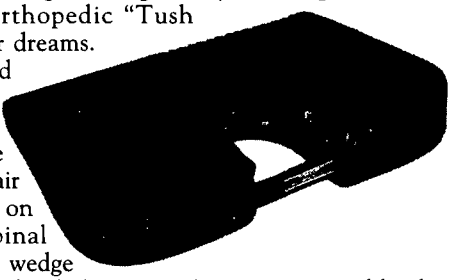

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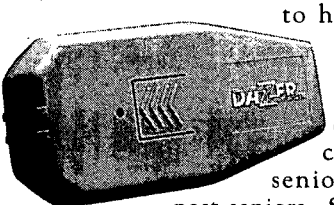

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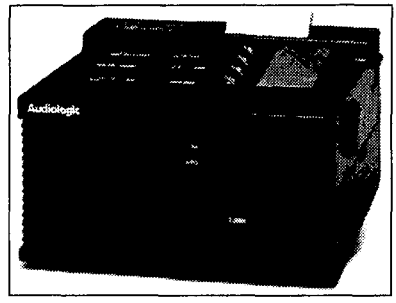

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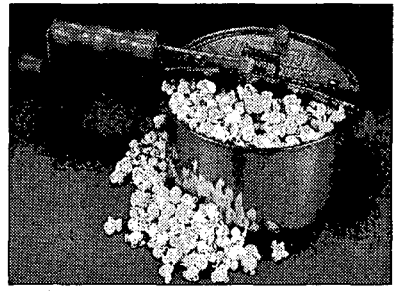

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William Tenn

THE GIRL WITH SOME KIND OF PAST. AND GEORGE.

Illustrated by Marshall Carroll

We're honored to have an opportunity to showcase a new story by the "Golden Age" science fiction author, William Tenn. Mr. Tenn was born in London, England in 1920, and immigrated to the United States two years later. He sold his first story to *Astounding* in 1945. His last tale appeared in *The Best of Omni #5* in 1982. Mr. Tenn is the author of two SF novels and six short story collections. He is also Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University.

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You know George.

He says one minute there was nothing in his living room but him and his TV and his VCR and the picture window overlooking half of the city, and the next minute there was this beautiful red-headed girl in a kind of shining red playsuit hovering in the air over his head. Not really hovering, not floating, but kind of all sprawled out every which way and staring down between her legs at him. Well, you know George.

George says she was making this musical sound, or something was making this musical sound, like a small synthesizer with hiccups; then she disappeared.

George says there was about three seconds of silence, just him and his VCR and his TV, then hiccup, hiccup, and she's sitting on the couch beside him, all red playsuit and beautiful long legs.

You know he's right? It's hard to think of something to say when a girl pops into your room like that?

But you know George.

"Gin, maybe, with just the teensiest bit of vermouth?"

The girl opened first her eyes, then her mouth at him, both very wide. She nodded.

"I don't have any olives," George told her, getting up. "But I have the funniest little green onions. You'll like them."

The girl nodded again and rubbed something on her chest. Nice chest, George says. "You are good," she said. "I didn't quite expect that. You are very, very good."

"Why shouldn't I be?" George asked. He took a good look at her while he was mixing the drinks at his bar. She was still staring at him, all big hazel eyes and nice chest. The red playsuit was not really a playsuit, he noticed. It was not the actual color red, either, he says, but somehow like red, if you know what he means. I don't. George says it was kind of a rosy fog that was vibrating all over the best parts of her very nice body, and it had tiny, transparent rosy knobs every couple of inches that kept popping up and then disappearing. He couldn't see anything that looked like a zipper anywhere.

"George Rice?" the girl said slowly, tentatively. She had a nice voice too; it came from deep in her diaphragm with plenty of breathing. "You are George Rice?"

"That's it. You're on the button," George told her. "You wanted George Rice, kid, you got George Rice." He came back with the drinks, found some coasters, and put the drinks on the whatchamacallit table next to the couch. The VCR had been running *Casablanca* all this time through the TV, so he turned it off.

The girl picked up her drink, sipped it, made a face, then nodded. She

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sipped some more and nodded some more. "I'm Antoinette Donnelly. This is—what? 1994? 1995?"

"Still 1994," George said. Now he took a good long look at her: she was unarguably juicy as hell. "You're a time traveler, right?"

"The first. The very first."

"Are you the inventor of time travel?"

"One of," the girl said. She put down her drink and studied it hard for a bit. Then she gave a quick little shudder and a long exhale and turned back to George. She was sitting with both feet solidly planted on the floor, not the way a girl usually sits on a couch, you know, all curled up.

"There are five of us," she explained. "I'm the youngest, the healthiest, the smoothest reflexes. And I had the best reason for going to our first logical target area, this time and place."

"The best reason?" George swirled his drink around—you know, the thoughtful, snotty way he does. But whatever he looked like, he says, he was feeling as if he had a hole in his chest and he was breathing through the hole. "Me?"

The girl walked over to the picture window and stared down the twenty or so floors. She tapped on the window and scratched at it. "Glass?"

"That's it," George said. "Glass." He tried to drink some gin and found he couldn't swallow. He set the drink on the table. "I was the reason? I mean, was I the reason?"

She came back and sat down on the couch. She wrapped her hands around her right knee and pulled it back up against her belly and rocked back and forth, just like a real girl. "Yes, I've always been terribly curious about what you were like when you were a young man. What was the name of that television special you were watching? Hasn't color television been developed yet?"

"Sure. This is a color set. I wasn't watching a TV special; it was a movie—*Casablanca*. It was made in black and white: it's a thirties or forties film. I don't like the colorized version. Why me? What did I—I mean, what will I—oh, hell, where do I stand in your time? What does history say about me? Why me? Hey? Huh? Why me?"

She shook her head at him reproachfully. "Don't do that. Be nice. I only have so very few hours before the spirillix goes down. And the skindrom's very weak on this trip. I want to see a lot and ask a lot, and I have to keep careful measurements of the chroniates in this room. So be nice. Please try not to be selfish and personally inquisitive."

George stared at this Antoinette, this Antoinette Donnelly. Who the hell did she think she was?

Still, he figured, still— There was that unarguably juicy body. And the interesting information she evidently had about him. Better go easy. Later on, maybe—

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"I will try," George told her, spreading his arms out in a great, truth-embracing gesture, "not to be selfish and personally inquisitive. It'll be hard, but I'll try. Any questions that I'm *allowed* to ask? Like, maybe, *when* are you from? How far in the future?"

She nodded. "A century. Just about. We thought that a century was long enough to avoid any—you know—complications, and long enough to look like a real voyage to the past."

"Look like to whom?"

"Oh, the Institute. People like that. But, of course, you were the other reason. For me, anyway."

"Of course." So they were back to him again. But he was not supposed to be personally inquisitive, now wasn't he? Bull*shit!* He felt like telling her to go measure her chroniates.

And then it hit him that the problem was also bullshit. The problem just couldn't be that difficult to solve. I mean, she knew what his achievement was: it was bound to be on her mind all the time. George represented something very, very special to her. She'd be thinking about him and his achievement every single second.

To be that famous and not know what you were famous for! To be so famous that the first time traveler went straight for you as soon as she got a chance! If that were so, it had to be incredibly big big-time, Moses-level, Shakespeare-level, Einstein-level. Maybe even bigger than that.

His autograph—what might that not be worth! The postcard he'd just scribbled to Lonnie Santangelo vacationing in Sweden—they could be bidding lunatic sums for it at an auction in some future version of Sotheby's. Where he planned to have dinner this evening could be an item of information that a biographer a century from now would give almost anything to know.

For that matter, he himself would give almost anything to know. Why waste time farting with this or doodling with that when you could be practicing the thing that was going to continue crashing like cymbals *across the world long after you were dead? He had to find out.*

And to all this, Antoinette Donnelly was the key. Very damn fortunately.

She was pure girl, after all, George says. You know—touch the right part at the right time in just the right way, and she's bound to react. By which, George says he means *in this case*, let her see a little bit of what he's become famous for. The first beginnings of that later big stuff.

So where to begin?

He wandered casually over to the bookcase and took his alto recorder off the top shelf, making casual conversation as he walked. "So you're from the end of the twenty-first century. Must be a pretty wonderful time to be living in."

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"Not at all," she laughed. "It feels to us just as your time does to you. Except for— Well, maybe I'd better not go into that. Anyway, most of what's important to us had already begun in your period. You know, computer networking, leveraged buyouts, gene splicing, all that sort of thing."

"Oh, sure, sure." He blew the dust off the recorder and put it to his lips. First he tootled a couple of bars of "Greensleeves," then he said, "Hey, what do you think of this?" and went into the rock number. You remember, the one he and Lester Pittstein wrote and tried to peddle about four years ago?

He kept his eyes on her face as he played it. Not much. As a matter of fact, she got off the couch and went over to the bookcase beside him. She seemed a hell of a lot more interested in his paperbounds than in what he was playing.

"This just came out, didn't it?" she said, pulling a suspense novel off the shelf and opening it to the copyright page. "He's still doing nothing but hard-boiled mysteries?"

George put the recorder away and freshened her drink. It was obvious that she wasn't much used to liquor. Despite the little she had had, there was already a faint glow to her. Believe me, if George says so, he knows.

"I started to write a suspense novel once," he said, thinking, maybe she's giving me a lead? "Want to look at the first chapter?"

"Uh-uh. Where's your—your *bathroom?"*

When she'd closed the door behind her, George sat down and began thinking hard. Obviously, it was not music and it was not literature. He was famous for something else. But what? Well, there were lots of other possibilities.

Money? Was he to become one of the great multi-billionaires of all time? How do you work into that, George wondered? Perhaps start talking about stocks and bonds?

Sure. Try to be smooth! "Hey, isn't it odd how well the utilities are doing today?" Or— "Anything you especially like about four-year debentures, Antoinette, old kiddo?"

Crap.

No, better stick to the logical, the things he'd actually experimented with, the things he was a little bit good at.

Meanwhile. He freshened her drink a little bit harder. He set out the green onions near her glass and got some thirsty-making stuff from the refrigerator, you know, a plateful of real spicy salami, some hot peppers, stuff like that, to put around and near her glass.

And he turned on *Casablanca* again—maybe? just possibly?—and turned it off fast: it was at the airport scene with Conrad Veidt and Claude Rains, not to mention Bergman and Bogey. Too damn much

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renunciation in that scene, George says. A renunciation mood is just plain blind alley, he claims.

When she came back, she pursed her lips at the salami. "I thought you people were afraid of foods like this. Isn't it full of what you call phlogiston?" She took a bite. "But it *is* good."

George was pleased that she washed it down with another mouthful of vermouth-flavored gin. "Phlogiston? What are you talking about?"

"Caloricol, phlogisterol—something like that. You have this superstition that having it in your food is going to kill you early."

"Oh, cholesterol. No, I don't bother with that. At least not at my age. Try the peppers. They're good too."

And while she tried the peppers, he tried her with other fame possibilities among his interests. Lots else. The only thing she seemed interested in was the pair of limericks he'd written way back when for his college humor magazine. But it turned out not to be the limericks.

There was a pen-and-ink caricature of him on the page facing the limericks. Now *that* grabbed her. Antoinette kept staring at it, turning it this way and that way. She seemed fascinated by it.

"I didn't do it," George told her. "Somebody—I don't remember his name—he was only a freshman who'd wandered into the office. . . Do you think it's that fine?"

"Not particularly. It's just that the resemblance is so strong."

"Resemblance? You mean between me now and me then?"

"No. Between you then and him then. Him at your age."

"Him? Who?"

"Your father. You both looked exactly alike at twenty."

"You've seen pictures of my father?"

"Of course. Do you have one of your mother here? I'd love to see which is the picture you've kept of your mother."

Her eyes were sparkling away, and only part of it was the gin. She'd been doing all right with the gin, George noticed, but he had the distinct feeling it was not her usual drink. She seemed unfamiliar with it, and she was pouring it down a bit too fast. Still, all to the good.

He hauled out a picture of his mother. Antoinette Donnelly practically jumped at it. "I've never seen this one," she squealed. "Oh, how lovely, how unexpected."

George says he was just beginning to come out of his bafflement. Why his parents? Well, if a man is maximum famous, there are all sorts of biographies written about him; there are chapters on his parents, there'd be pictures of his parents in the illustration section, you know, all the interesting stuff about his origins.

She was still crooning over his mother's photograph. And you know, he says, it was just a very ordinary studio shot. He listened to her go *oh!*

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and *ah!* and make the kind of breath-kissy sounds girls do when they're all overcome, and then, suddenly, she said something. She definitely *said* something.

"My ancestor," she said. "My very own ancestor."

"Your wha-at?"

"My ancestor. My great-great-great-grandmother."

George says it hit him harder than the gin was hitting her. He says he went all kinds of rubbery. "Your ancestor," he got out after a while. "That makes me. . ."

"My great-great-grandfather. Exactly. How do you do, great-great-granddad?"

She shook hands with him, you know, solemn-comical. George says he didn't feel he had much muscle in the arm she was shaking.

"Is that the reason you came back to see me?" he asked.

The question seemed to upset her a little bit. "Most of," she said. Then she thought for a second or two and grimaced. "Some of," she added.

Naturally, George took a good hard look at her now. There seemed to be a real family resemblance, but he wasn't sure how much he was reading into it. On the other hand, there'd been no red hair in the family, none at all that he remembered. And Antoinette Donnelly's hair was bright red, flame red, almost orange. Well, maybe he was going to marry a red-headed woman. Or maybe his son would. Or his grandson.

But here he'd been half-planning to put it to her—his own great-great-granddaughter. Wow.

And then he thought, why wow? First, who would know? Second, was it really incest? She was a lot farther away, relationwise, than a second cousin, say. And nobody objected to anyone making it with a second cousin. What an opportunity! It was his chance to make it with the next century—something no cocksman before him had ever done.

He freshened her drink again and took a sip from his—just to keep things looking right.

And the point was also to get the information out of her. George says it hit him that what he had to do was both. And he knew he could. If he got her loose enough to get her into bed, she'd nine chances out of ten be loose enough to tell him what he wanted to know. There's nothing like the aftermath of the sack to make a person feel like talking.

You know George. He knows.

"Would you like to see a picture of the two of them together?"

"Oh, yes."

"It's in the bedroom. Bring your drink with you."

And that's all it took, George says.

He says he got the framed wedding picture out of a bureau drawer and, while she crooned over it, he got his arm around her waist, and then

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she fast slurped the rest of her drink down, and he fast slurped at the base of her throat and the side of her throat and then on down. He says he didn't even have to push her into bed. She flowed.

The big problem was that jumpsuit or playsuit she was wearing. George says that trying to remove it reminded him of way back in his teens and the first time he'd tried to get a brassiere off a girl while kissing her passionately and all the time acting suave and man-of-the-world. That red stuff just wouldn't come off her, no matter how he pulled or pushed or got his fingers inside. There was no catch, no hook anywhere, that he could find.

She had to do it for him—just like with that first girl and that first brassiere. She just put her finger on one of the little knobs or buttons, and the whole garment let out a wheeze and shriveled up into a little red bump on her right shoulder.

And off they went.

How good was she? Not great, George says. Not at all bad; just not great. And, he says, sex in the twenty-first century is still pretty much sex as we know it. If you've been in one century, he figures, you've been in them all. Maybe the two biggest differences are how many clothes you have to take off and what you do about birth control. She looked like a level-headed female so he decided he could trust her on birth control.

That left the incest angle and I asked him about that. He says that making it with your great-great-granddaughter from the twenty-first century is not much different from making it with your clothes-designer neighbor from across the hall.

If that's what he says, that's what it is. You have to figure he knows.

They had two, three rolls, and she seemed to get a little drunker with each roll. When it was all over and they lay apart, George looked her over carefully. A real fine body—and you know what? He says she was still clutching the wedding picture of his parents in one hand. As a matter of fact, up to a few seconds ago, she'd been banging away at the sheets with it.

He got up, took it away from her and put it back in the bureau drawer.

This Antoinette Donnelly. She was still breathing hard. "You are fantastic," she said. "You are absolutely fantastic, Mr. George Rice."

"Thanks," he said with as much of a modest smirk as George can manage. "My father thanks you. My mother thanks you. And I thank you." He took her drink off the night table and handed it to her. Keep her loose.

She drank some—you know, sex always makes me thirsty too—and held up a hand. There was a wiggly black dot inside her wrist. "Ooch," she said. "It's late."

George figured it was now or never to move. "You're not going without

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at least giving me a hint?" he whimpered—you know how George does. "Just a hint? Not even that?"

She seemed to say something to the red bump on her right shoulder. There was a fast wheeze or something and the red playsuit kind of boiled up and out and over her body. She was obviously thinking hard.

"You are so very, very good," she grinned. "You even know exactly how to ask for something you have no right to ask."

"No right? Aw, come on." He bent down and kissed her. "I've got a perfect right. A great-great-grandfather's right."

She giggled. "Some great-great-grandfather!"

He walked back to the living room with her. Feeling great. It was obvious she couldn't refuse him, couldn't hold back. He was probably strutting a bit as he walked. You know George.

"Come on. Why did you have to see me? What's so great about me?"

"Well, to begin with there are—I mean, were—your parents. Their accomplishments."

"My parents? What are you talking about? They were all right, they led okay lives, but, hey, they didn't *do* very much. What accomplishments?"

"Well, for just one thing, your mother's critical study of the academic novel. That by itself is a pretty big item."

"Mom's book? Oh, no. She had to have it published by a vanity press. It cost her four thousand dollars. And it came out a year after she died."

Antoinette shrugged. "So? It's still definitive. The seminal study of the academic novel of the twentieth century. Everything else takes off from that."

"My God. And Dad? Poor old nutty Dad? Don't tell me his matchbook collection, or his beer can collection. . . . Hey, don't tell me that."

At this point, the girl touched a couple of raised knobs on her playsuit. A kind of tinkling started up. "Well," she said. "if you're talking about his famous seven collections—the ones he left to his local branch of the public library—if you're talking about those, that's exactly what I do have to tell you."

"Famous. You said famous. Those crappy collections? I mean you couldn't walk around in our basement because of that junk."

"Yes, I said famous. Of course, I meant his accompanying monograph as much as the collections themselves. There's a two-year course at most universities based on that monograph: *Popular Culture and Its Industrial Base*. Well, actually only half of it is based on your father's monograph; the other half has to do with the extension into musical theory that one of your children did late in life."

"Which one of my children? How many kids will I have? Will they—"

"No. I can't go into that kind of detail about future events. Surely you can see why?" She rubbed hard on a reddish button and the tinkling

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developed into a definite and noticeable rhythm. A kind of hiccuppy rhythm. "I wish I could. I'd particularly like to tell you about my grandmother, one of your granddaughters. So much of her research on the speed of light as a sometime constant has been the background of all my work on time travel. Although, her cousin's theories, I'd say, are also really—"

"Cousin! That's one of my descendants, too, right? I hear what you're telling me. From my parents down, quite a goddam family!"

"Oh, yes, quite a family. A genetic delight, a eugenic fantasia. A family that's been scrutinized exactly as the Bachs of Germany have been scrutinized."

And now she was playing around with a whole bunch of those rosy buttons. Back and forth. Up and down. It almost sounded like a tune. And it was getting loud.

But George was paying no attention to that. He was hot on the trail now.

"And of that whole famous family, you picked me to come back to. Me you wanted to see. Just me!"

She was concentrating on those buttons, but she looked up, a little annoyed. "Of course you were the one I wanted to see. You have to be the most interesting one of the lot."

George grabbed her shoulders and began shaking her. "*Why?* You've got to tell me *why*. What did I do? What *will* I do?"

"Please!" She pushed him away hard. George says she had a lot of power for something her size. "Please! You'll defuse the spirillix. It's already falling fast."

George bounced back. "Come on. Don't do this. Tell me why. Why me particularly?" He says his voice had gotten hoarse. He was practically yelling in a whisper.

She looked up from the buttons and stared at him. "Don't you see? Surely you know!"

"Know what? What's special about me? *What?*"

"You're the only one in the family, the only one for a whole bunch of generations who achieved nothing, absolutely nothing. And, when I was given the chance, I just had to find out why."

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" George says his two lips tasted like paper.

"Nothing at all. I've been puzzled by it all my life. Nor am I the only one in my time who finds it baffling. The articles! The hypotheses! And I found out why just two minutes or so after I arrived. It's so obvious."

"Obvious?" George says he croaked out.

"Yes. You're just too good at what you do do." She gestured toward the bedroom. "The way you managed me into there. And the way— How could there be room for any other skill?"

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Those musical sounds got very loud and very fast. And then she was gone. George says like a bubble bursting, a bubble bursting where no bubble had been.

And that's all. I mean, that's all, folks.

It's a pretty weird story, you have to admit. It's not a story every guy would tell about himself.

But he says Antoinette Donnelly missed the whole point. He says the record will damn well show he was first-rate at *something*. He grins like a cat when he says that.

You know George. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 63)

manuscripts), "A Far Countrie," set in a tiny Central American nation drenched in magic and enchantment, where anything can happen, and usually does; from present-day Earth, **Robert Reed** then takes us ten million years into the very far future and to a strange planet in a distant galaxy for his powerful new novella, "Sister Alice," a highly evocative study of a time when humans have developed the powers of gods—or some of them have, anyway; **Steven Utley** then takes us several hundred million years back in time to the very remote past, back before dinosaurs were even a distant glimmer in some scurrying little bottom-feeder's eyestalk, back to an embattled and overworked scientific research station drifting in shallow prehistoric seas, for a fascinating look at what can happen "There and Then"; new writer **Valerie J. Freireich** shuttles us to the frozen wastelands of near-future Antarctica for a taut, suspenseful, and intriguing new novella that explores the destiny of chance-met lovers who are far more than merely star-crossed, in "Ice Atlantis"; the late **Isaac Asimov,** probably the most famous science fiction writer of the last half of the twentieth century, makes what will tragically be one of his last appearances anywhere with a new story, the penultimate George and Azazel story (we have one left in inventory), the very funny "More Things in Heaven and Earth"; new writer **Ray Vukcevich** makes a funny and strange *Asimov's* debut with a story that spells out the unexpected consequences of a very radical Fashion Statement indeed, in "My Mustache"; new writer **Sonia Orin Lyris** puts us in the power of a deadly and remorseless Enigma, one with as many layers as any puzzle-lover could care to unravel, in the compelling "It Might Be Sunlight"; and critically acclaimed author **Lewis Shiner** returns to tell us some "Secrets" that perhaps it would be better not to know. Plus an array of columns and features!

Look for our huge, groaning-at-the-seams issue on sale on your newsstands on September 14, 1993.

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A new dam and an old graveyard reveal some unsettling secrets about . . .

THE COUNTRY DOCTOR

Steven Utley

Gardner was drowning, and strangers were laying hands on the bones of my forebears. I felt obligated to see that liberties weren't taken with my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and other good, God-fearing ladies, so I put the business on auto pilot and made the drive as if on auto pilot myself.

I viewed the visit as a familial duty, not a sentimental journey. I hadn't been back to Gardner in twenty-five years. I'd always told myself that, with my grandparents dead and their house taken over by obscure cousins-removed, there was nothing to come back for. Soon there would be nothing to come back *to*. The dam was completed, the waters were rising. Gardner was drowning.

Once in the town, however, I couldn't simply drive to the cemetery. It wouldn't have taken two minutes. Wherever you were in a place the size of Gardner, you weren't far from anywhere else, and now, especially, everything was smaller and closer together than it had seemed when I was a kid. But I found that I had to drive down my grandparents' old street, had to stop in front of what had been their house. I sat with the motor running and stared disconsolately. Throughout my childhood, though I moved wherever the military took my father, my grandparents' house, a big, warm clapboard pile, had remained the center of the world, the universe—*home*. My earliest memories were of being in that house, surrounded by relatives, loved, safe. Now it sat waiting for the water. My grandfather had been a carpenter, among other things; I could see his shed in back. There had been a vegetable patch back there, too. My grandmother had shelled a lot of peas and snapped a lot of beans from it.

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The other houses on the block had once been features of a familiar landscape. Now, curtainless windows gave most of them a look of stupid surprise. One was carefully boarded up, as if the owners fully intended to return. The house next to it looked agape and miserable. Paint hung from it in strips. The owners must have stopped bothering with upkeep when they heard about the dam; finally, they'd just walked away. All but one of the lawns on the block were overgrown. A handful of people still remained, the die-hard element, determined to hold out until the water lapped over their doorsteps, and to keep their yards looking nice in the meantime.

It was three blocks to the cemetery, long blocks for someone dragging an orthopedic shoe. Nevertheless, I told myself. Nevertheless. I turned off the motor, got out of the car. The sun was at zenith. There was no wind. A male chorus of cicadae sang of love's delights to prospective mates. The day felt and sounded exactly like all the summer days I'd spent in Gardner in my childhood. I put my hands in my pockets and started walking, slowly, stunned by the force of the memories crowding in on me. I remembered how my grandmother used to sit in a metal porch chair and, as she put it, have herself a little talk with Jesus while she snapped those beans. Sometimes she sang gospel songs. She only ever sang the melodies, but I had been to enough revival meetings to know the words to whatever she sang. Sometimes, hearing her, I'd stop my playing and sing the words while she hummed. . . .

My eyes began to sting. Gardner was drowning.

Around the corner had lived Blanche, who was my grandmother's age and whose relation to me was, then and now, unclear. Someone lived there still—a green station wagon with a dinged-up fender sat in the driveway, and there were curtains in the windows—but Blanche herself was long dead, killed in an automobile accident. I'd liked her a lot. One summer, she had given me the empty coffee can in which I buried my grandmother's dead parakeet Petey. I knew exactly where I'd scooped out Petey's grave and wondered what I might find if I were to open it now. Nothing, probably—at most, a few crumbling shards of coffee-can rust. Tiny little bones dissolve in no time. On the next block was the crumbling brick shell of Cobb's Corner Market, where I'd sometimes spent my entire weekly stipend, twenty-five cents, on comic books and a Coke. Dime comic books and nickel soft drinks—it had been that long ago, and it was all about to pass forever from sight and memory.

Drowning, drowning. . . .

More vehicles were parked by the cemetery than there were in the whole town. I saw many opened graves—it could have been the day after Resurrection Day. At least a dozen people wearing old clothes were working among the headstones. I knew in a very broad way what these

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archeologists were supposed to be doing here, and I did see individuals sifting dirt through screens or duck-walking around exhumed coffins with tape measures in their hands, but what I mostly saw looked like just a lot of hot, dirty shovelwork with nothing scientific about it.

I came upon two youngish men at the end of the first row of graves. On the ground between them was a new coffin. Its lid was open, and I saw that it was empty. One of the men nodded a hello at me.

"How's it going?" I said.

"Well," he said, "it *is* going."

I gestured vaguely around. "These're all my relatives."

They looked at me as if I'd caught them doing something naughty.

"Well," said the one who'd spoken before, "we're taking real good care of everyone, Mister—"

"Riddle."

The second man pointed away and said, "Most of the Riddle family's still located over on that side."

"Yes," I said, "I know." I did know; it was all coming back; I could have found the Riddles blindfolded, and the Riches and the Bassetts, too. I had seen both of my maternal grandfather's parents buried here, then his wife, finally his own self. The first Riches and Bassetts had been laid to rest here in the 1850s; Riddles came along after the war, when a lot of ruined Southerners were moving around and resettling. Relatively speaking, the concentration of Riddles wasn't great—Riddles, it once was explained to me, tended to die young and tended also to have wanderlust. My father had been orphaned when he was barely into his teens, and members of his line had come to rest in odd places throughout the South, the West, and as far away as the Coral Sea. The first graveside service I'd attended in the Gardner cemetery was for a young cousin of mine, Kermit, who one summer day had succumbed to the fascination of a fallen power line. The last one was for my grandfather.

I nodded at the new coffin. "Who's this for?"

"Whoever," one of the men said. "We try to keep everything together, even the box somebody was buried in. Some of these old graves, though, you find a few splinters of wood and some rusty nails, nothing you could still call a coffin."

"Is Doctor Taylor here?"

"He's somewhere around here." He looked about and nodded off toward the south end of the cemetery. "I think he's over that way."

"Thank you." The two men seemed glad to see me walk on.

When I was a child, I'd sometimes been sent to spend the summer with my grandparents. My grandmother and great-grandmother had visited this cemetery often. Between them they must have known seven out of every ten people buried here. They always brought flowers, and usually

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they brought me. They'd move among the graves, place the flowers, murmur secrets to the dead or prayers to Jesus, murmur genealogy to me, life histories, accounts of untimely, often horrific, deaths—most of their anecdotes were imbued with pain and tragedy. Sometimes I was interested and listened. Sometimes I was bored, drowsy from the heat, and instead listened to the cicadae. The sound of those summers was one long insect song, cicadae and honey-bees by day, crickets and mosquitoes by night, punctuated by gospel-piano chords, hands clapping time, voices singing, *I'm gonna have a little talk with Jesus, I'm gonna tell Him all about my troubles. . . .*

It kept coming back, coming back.

It came back as I passed Dr. Sweeny's headstone, which lay in the grass by the edge of the driveway. Nearby, a man wearing a faded plaid shirt was excavating the grave with a shovel. As headstones in this cemetery went, Dr. Sweeny's was pretty fancy, with some decorative cuts and a longer inscription than most.

Dr. Chester Sweeny
d. June 30, 1900
Erected in respectful memory
by those he tended
these 30 years

Dr. Sweeny was the only doctor, the only Sweeny, and the only non-relative buried in the cemetery. I had been filled with dismay and disbelief the first time I saw his name on that stone. Until that moment, I'd thought that doctors were immune to sickness and exempt from death. Mammaw, I said to my great-grandmother, whom I'd been trailing past the rows, what kind of a doctor *dies,* Mammaw? "Honey," she told me, "doctors die just like everybody else. Everybody's got to die. That's why the important thing in life's to be baptized in Jesus' name, so you'll go to heaven when you die." But why, I demanded, do people *have* to die? She didn't answer, just looked at the stone, and after what was probably only seconds but must have seemed like a whole minute or a full hour to an impatient child, she said, "Old Doc Sweeny. I went to this funeral. I was a girl then. I was nearly as young then as you are now." She was in her sixties when she told me this; naturally, I couldn't think of her as a girl or imagine that she had ever been nearly as young as anybody. "I remember because everybody in the whole valley come for it, and thet's when I met your Pappaw for the first time. He didn't want nothing to do with me then, but later, well, I changed his mind. But that day everybody come to pay respects to old Doc Sweeny." Was he as old as you, Mammaw? "Doc Sweeny was as old as Methuselah. Why, *my* momma, that was your great-great-gran'maw Vannie Bassett, wasn't even born when he come here. My own daddy made the box to bury him in and druv it here in his

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wagon, and a man over to Dawson give this stone. Doc Sweeny was just as poor as everybody else and didn't have no money set aside. Seems like there never was so good a one as him again. He druv his buggy all over, day or night, rain or shine. Not like these doctors we got now. Poor as he was, too, he always had some candy and play-pretties for us littlens in his pockets. I remember him visiting my momma when she was sick, and when he was leaving, he give me a piece of peppermint candy and said, My child, my child. And I was a sassy thing then, just like you, didn't have no more manners'n a pig. Instead of thanking him for the candy, I just said, I ain't neither your child," and she had laughed delightedly at the memory of her own devilishness.

Thereafter, throughout the remaining summers of my childhood, Dr. Sweeny occupied a place in my mind as special as the one he occupied in the cemetery. I soon got over his being a dead doctor, but I remained impressed by his anomalous presence in what was effectively an outsized family plot. It suggested to me that he must have been, somehow, one of us. Even now, he had power to fascinate me. Gazing down at his stone, I found myself wondering exactly what he must have done, besides giving candy and cheap toys to children, to so endear himself. Mostly just be there, I guessed, when folks needed a sympathetic ear and a few sugar pills. Doctors in Sweeny's day had done more nursing than actual doctoring. Much of the nursing was ineffectual, and most of the doctoring was downright savage. There was no Food and Drug Administration to look over a physician's shoulder as he dosed people with God only knew what. Maybe this particular country doctor had won his neighbors' trust and respect simply by not killing inordinate numbers of patients.

I tore myself away, moved on, and found Dr. Taylor and a woman squatting in the shade at the end of a row. He was strongly built, balding, with a sunburnt face. She had long, reddish-brown hair tied back in a ponytail and was covered with freckles everywhere that I could see. A map of the graveyard was spread on the ground between them, with numbers and other marks scribbled all over it. None of the graves at this end of the row had been opened yet. I noticed four narrow, squarish stones set into the ground at the feet of two graves identified by a common headstone as those of John Hellman Rich and Julia Anne Rich.

"Doctor Taylor," I said.

Both of them looked up, and I could tell from his expression that he didn't recognize me. We had met only briefly, weeks before.

"Doug Riddle," I said.

"Mister Riddle!" He stood quickly, brushed dirt off his hands, started to offer to shake, pulled back suddenly. "I don't know if you want to shake hands with me. I've been rooting around in graves all day." He

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seemed genuinely flustered. He turned to the woman, who had risen with him. "Gertie, this is Doug Riddle. My associate, Gertrude Latham."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she said. She seemed as ill at ease as he. She had a wonderful accent, German come through the heart of the Deep South.

"Finding out what you came to find out?" I said.

Taylor made an attempt at a smile. "In this line of work, you never know what you'll find out."

"Some people," I said, meaning mainly my irrepressible Uncle G. A., "called this place Gardner Gardens."

They looked uncertain, as if unsure they'd heard me right. He ventured to say, "Oh?"

"The planting ground," I said, then shrugged. "Small-town black humor."

"Ah. Yes." Taylor smiled again, more feebly than before, and tried to make up the difference by adding a chuckle, with results that embarrassed everyone. My own smile began to hurt my mouth.

Gertrude Latham went for a save. She nodded toward Julia Anne Rich's grave and said, "That headstone tells us a great deal about this young woman's life. Do you know anything about her?"

I glanced at the dates on the stone. Julia Anne Rich had died, age twenty-two, before the turn of the century, when my great-grandparents were children. "I remember the name," I said, "from when I used to come here as a kid. I thought Julia Anne was a nice name—" I gave Latham an apologetic look "—for a girl's name. But I don't know anything about her in particular."

Latham nodded at the grave again. "Those are her babies there by her feet. Judging from the dates, she lost four of them in a row. The last one may have killed her."

If this was archeology, I wasn't impressed. I felt sure I could have deduced as much from the information on the stones. Childbirth in the nineteenth century was perilous.

I said, "There're more babies and mothers buried here than anything else. Lot of children's graves, too. Children used to die of everything. After World War Two, though, hardly anyone except old people got buried here. All the young people went into the service or moved to Evansville to work in the P-forty-seven factory. And they just never came back."

The two archeologists were staring at me. There was something like admiration in Taylor's expression. I felt a sheepish sort of pleasure and could not help smiling as he asked me, "Are you Gardner's official historian?"

I shook my head. "But there was a time when I must've known the

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name on every last one of these headstones. I got to be a whiz at subtraction from figuring out by the dates how old people were when they died. And in the forties people did start going away and not coming back. My father went into the service and stayed in. And somebody in the family did go build P-forty-sevens, too. There were framed prints of the things hanging in a spare bedroom at my grandparents' house for years. Official prints, with the Republic Aircraft logo."

"Mister Riddle," Taylor said, "we could use your knowledge to interpret this site. I'd appreciate it if you'd consider letting us interview you sometime."

"You'd be what's known in anthropology as an informant," said Latham.

Informant didn't have the ring to it that *official historian* did, but I was flattered all the same. There's little to compare with having people hang on everything you say. Anyway, I told myself, maybe Gardner was too small for a full-fledged historian. Nothing had ever happened here—nothing that mattered to anybody besides Riddles, Riches, and Bassetts, harvest time, tent meetings, weddings, funerals, somebody's barn being raised or burning down. No one famous had ever come from Gardner, or to it, for that matter. And it struck me then, with unexpected and shaming clarity, that I'd never made the effort to bring my own children or grandchildren to this place, that I should have been murmuring genealogy and tragic personal histories to them all their young lives, teaching them about family and the continuity of life. I should have been telling them, "Every one of your ancestors lived and suffered and sometimes all but swam up waterfalls like salmon to make sure you'd be here today and the family would continue and the thread be unbroken. They were brave and wonderful people, and if you don't believe it, just look here at your great-aunt, your great-something Julia Anne, who lost four babies one right after another, which isn't even a record, and it must've seemed to her like the worst thing in the world to lose the first one but then she carried three more, suffered crushing loss every time, died a probably painful and possibly protracted death trying to deliver the last one—" And, "*Doug*," my wife would've said by then, "*Dad*," my daughter would've said by now, each with that same disapproving furrow between her eyebrows. I do get carried away at times.

I blinked the thoughts away and looked at the two scientists. "So," I said, "what're you finding out?"

Latham said, "We never really know what we've found until we've finished an excavation and, uh, put all the pieces of the puzzle together."

"Is there a puzzle here?"

She essayed a smile. It was the best smile any of us had managed thus far. "There's always a puzzle."

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"And you always find a solution?"

Her smile got even better. "This is what you'd call quick and dirty archeology. We have to excavate by shovel, get as much information out as we can, as fast as we can, and move on. We don't have a lot of time. All we can do is figure out what the person was buried with and measure the bones. And we try to look for evidence of disease that would show up in the skeletal material."

"Is there evidence of a lot of disease?"

Everything suddenly felt awkward again. I could tell by the look she gave Taylor that she regretted her last statement.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Roy Rich's grave right where I'd left it decades before. "Here's a puzzle for you," I said. "What does this stone tell you about Roy Rich's life?"

Latham glanced at it. "He died at age fifteen."

"He was lucky to live that long," I said. "Or maybe not so lucky. I remember Roy. He was deformed. Not 'differently abled,' not even 'physically handicapped.' Deformed. His sister Betty, too." I pointed to Betty's headstone, next to his. "She died at age twelve. Those two had everything in the world wrong with them. I guess you'll see for yourself when you open the coffins."

The two scientists were silent. It was very hot, and sweat gleamed on Taylor's pate and beaded on Latham's forehead and upper lip. I felt slimy inside my clothing. The cicadae would not shut up.

At last, Taylor said, stiffly, "We'll write a report when we finish the excavation. If you like, I'll send you a copy."

"I'm sure it'd be much too technical for me. Tell me something about my ancestors that I can go home and tell my wife."

Taylor looked about as unhappy as any human being I'd seen lately. Latham looked as if she were trying to wish somebody away—me, of course. The more ill at ease they became, the pushier I felt. Maybe it was the gene for devilishness, handed down from Mammaw.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be something *nice,*" I said, "if that's what's holding you back. Nothing you tell me can be any more horrible than some of the things Granny and Mammaw told me." I looked over the rows. A truck pulled away from the gate, bearing some of my dead away to strange soil. "Doctor Taylor, when we met last month, you said this ground's full of history, and this was a one-time-only chance to get at it."

"Yes," he said, slowly—warily, I thought. "Yes, I did say that."

"This is the last time I'll ever see this place. Living or dead, everyone's being scattered. I know it's true I'll be able to visit my relatives' new graves over in Dawson, but they'll be, they'll seem out of place over there. *This* is where my grandparents and great-grandparents were buried.

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This little spot in the road was their home. It was my home, too, for a while. Next year, it'll all be gone, the whole valley'll be under water. It'll be like Gardner never existed. So please indulge me. I'm not going to gum up the works for you, I really don't want to be in your way or bother you a lot, but I need . . . I need to carry away everything from here that I can this time."

"We try," Taylor said, "we try very hard to be careful of the feelings of living relatives of the people we exhume. It's been my experience that relatives shouldn't, well, watch. And that despite what they say, they don't really want to know everything."

"Look. There're a few chicken thieves buried here. There's even supposed to be a horse thief. And one of my cousins stabbed her husband with a big sharp kitchen knife when he beat up on the kids. He isn't buried here, but the point is, I don't have many illusions about my family. I'll try not to he shocked by anything you tell me."

He manifestly wasn't convinced. "It's not illusions I'm talking about. I'm talking more along the lines of—" he couldn't look at me now, so he compelled me not to look at him by pointing down at his map of the cemetery—"grislier facts. Most people don't find it pleasant to contemplate, ah, physical abnormality."

Pleasant or no, I almost said, I contemplate it with every step. I could've gone on, mentioned my children's and grandchildren's congenital problems, too. I did say, "I'm not squeamish, either."

He gave me an okay-but-I-warned-you look. "There's evidence of pretty high incidences of birth defects, of bone disorders. Many of them are kind of gruesome and unusual."

If he was expecting me to flinch, he was disappointed. If I was supposed to react strongly in any way, I failed. The only reaction I noticed in myself was some kind of inward shrug, meaning, approximately, Sure, of course, so what? In a community like Gardner, with no medical facilities and not even a resident doctor since Dr. Sweeny, there had been no avoiding the raw proof that flesh is weak, treacherous stuff. The maimed, the hideously diseased, and the genetic misfires had at all times been at least semi-present and semi-visible.

I said, "Unusual how?"

He exhaled a soft, exasperated sound and said to Latham, "Gertie, would you please take Mister Riddle over to where Dan and Greg are working and . . . show him."

She almost managed to conceal her distress at finding herself appointed tour-guide. Anger flashed in her blue eyes, but she answered, "Sure, Bob."

We walked past the rows. Up ahead, I could see two men kneeling beside an open grave.

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"Doctor Taylor," I said, "seems to think I'm made of glass."

"Please try to understand. Working in recent graveyards is about the least pleasant job there is in archeology. It's very sensitive and very stressful, actually."

One of the archeologists kneeling by the grave was writing in a notebook. The other poked at the contents of a coffin, yellow bones, disintegrating remnants of a dress. They smiled when they saw Latham, went blank when they saw me. Introductions were made: the man with the notebook was Greg, the one doing the poking, Dan. They received the news that I was a relative without cheering.

Latham looked down at the bones and said, "Is this one of the—is this one?"

"Yep," said Dan.

"Would you please show Mister Riddle what you've got here?"

Both of the men regarded me doubtfully for a second, and then Dan said, "Okay. Well, sir. Know anything about human anatomy?"

"Not much more than the foot bone's connected to the ankle bone." I hadn't intended to call anyone's attention to my mismatched shoes, but Dan was the least-stiff person I'd met so far. He just nodded and turned to the bones and began speaking very easily. It was refreshing.

"I won't make this technical," he said, "and I'll skip the small stuff. Um, the long bones in your hand, how long'd you say they are?"

I glanced at the back of my hand. "Three, four inches."

"Close enough." He directed my attention to the remains inside the coffin and pointed out an array of bones as long as cigars. "These are the same bones, and there're the fingers. As you can see, it's a pretty extraordinarily oversized hand."

It was almost an understatement. Whoever the dead girl or woman was—I looked for the name, but glare on the stone obscured it—she must have looked as if she had an oar up her sleeve.

"Typically," Dan went on, "congenital problems left the door open for all sorts of other problems. She must've been in pain her whole life. She was about eighteen or twenty when she died. Most of the others've been much younger."

"There're really a lot of skeletons like this one?"

"Yep." He watched me carefully now. "Awful lot of 'em."

"Enough to make you wonder," said the other man, Greg, "if the local drinking water isn't spiked with uranium dust or thalidomide or something."

Latham shot him a thoroughly dismayed look. Greg cleared his throat and examined a page in his notebook very, very carefully.

"Actually," I said, "my family's probably just dangerously inbred."

Latham and the two men seemed not to know how to take that remark.

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I let them twist in the wind, stared down at the tormented bones, thought, Roy Rich, Betty . . . I had sometimes glimpsed them through the half-open doors of their back bedrooms when my grandmother visited their mother and hauled me along. My cousin Dorsey would nowadays be called "learning-disabled." Aunt Jean was "movement-impaired." Several of her lower vertebrae were fused together; walking, standing, even sitting, all were torture for her. Once, I eavesdropped fascinatedly on a morbid conversation about her back and hip and knee problems and strange calcium spurs the doctor didn't know what to make of. Once, I was appointed to help her down the aisle at a revival meeting, at a pace glacial and excruciating even for me. The valley resounded with preaching on hot summer nights, and every household brought forth its lame, afflicted, dying, and sent them forward to be healed by faith. Summer after summer, I saw the lines of pain deepen around my aunt's mouth. I saw the microcephalic and the acromegalic, saw the man whose body appeared to be collapsing telescope-fashion, the man with the tumor that sat on the side of his neck like a second head, the woman with calves like some pachyderm's, the girl who was one great angry strawberry mark, saw it all and became inured to it. Faith never healed anyone, but no one ever lost faith. DNA had let us down, but Jesus would yet lift us up.

I was jarred out of this reverie as Dr. Taylor strode up in a hurry. He had a frown on his face and appeared not to notice me. "Gertie," he said, "Rita's got something we better take a look at."

He turned without waiting to see if she followed. She hurried after him, and after a moment's hesitation I went lugging after her. Two men and a woman with her nose painted white stood over a warped coffin. One of the men held the lid like a surfboard. We looked down, and Latham said, "My God," *mah Gott.*

Lying in the coffin was the apparently preserved body of an elderly man in a dirty funeral suit. Lying in the grass by the edge of the driveway was Dr. Chester Sweeny's headstone. I heard a roaring in my head.

The white-nosed woman, Rita, couldn't contain herself. She said, "It's *not* a cadaver!"

Latham asked, "What do you mean?"

"I'm *saying* this isn't a dead, embalmed body here! It's not a body at all!"

Rita pointed to the side of the elderly man's face. I peered and saw some sort of crease or seam under the jawline. It had come loose beneath one ear, and a flap of skin, if it was skin, was turned down there, exposing smooth white bone, if it was bone.

"Check it out," said Rita, and used her thumb to push up an eyelid and show us a startlingly realistic fake eye set in a grimy socket. Then

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she pinched the loose flap of skin between her thumb and forefinger and pulled. It came off easily, exposing a bony tri-lobed bulb with openings that couldn't have been for eyes or any other familiar organ. Where the jaw ought to have been was a complicated prosthetic jaw complete with upper and lower rows of teeth and a fake tongue.

Nobody spoke for at least half a minute.

Latham looked at Rita and then at Taylor, whose frown deepened when he saw me. I said, "What," and then, "Why did, why would someone bury this," and couldn't think of a suitable noun. I had to settle for gesturing.

"Prosthetics," Rita said. "The whole thing's goddamn prosthetics. *Feel* it," and first Taylor, then Latham, and finally I knelt beside the coffin. I touched the right cheek. It felt gritty but . . . I pulled my hand away quickly.

Rita looked about wildly and said, "Now what is that stuff?"

Latham said, "It feels like," and stopped and shook her head perplexedly.

"Fleshlike," murmured Taylor, barely audibly.

Rita nodded vehemently. "So what kind of stuff *is* it, Bob?"

"I don't know. Some plastic, I don't know."

"This grave was dug and filled in nineteen hundred," Rita said, "and no one touched it until it was opened today. I know because Gil and I opened it ourselves, and we'd've known if it'd been disturbed. This thing was *in* the ground ever since it was *put* in the ground, back when nobody, *nobody*, could make plastic like this."

"Rita," Latham said, "just calm down and—"

"Calm down? Gertie, nobody can make goddamn plastic like this *now!*"

Everybody was quiet again for a time. I looked around a circle of red sweaty faces. Taylor said to Rita, in a strangled voice, "What's under the clothes?"

Rita carefully opened the coat and the shirt, exposing a dirty but otherwise normal-looking human torso. It was an old man's torso, flabby, loose-skinned, fish-belly white. Wiry hair grew in tufts around the nipples and furred the skin. Rita touched the belly gingerly, pinched up a fold, and, wide-eyed, peeled it right off like skin off a hard-boiled egg. The inner surface had many small fittings and trailed strands of wire as fine as spiderweb. Within the exposed cavity, where a ribcage ought to have been, was a structure like a curved piece of painted iron lawn furniture.

Someone muttered, "What in the hell—" Maybe it was me, though I am not a swearing man.

Rita started to touch the structure, but her hand trembled, and she pulled it back. She looked around, gray-faced, and said, "Too weird for me, Bob. Just too goddamn weird. I'm sorry."

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Taylor touched the bulb carefully, then the chest structure.

"Doctor," I said, "what're we looking at?"

"Well, obviously, some kind of articulated skeleton, but—"

"Is it, is this more—what, some birth defect, bone disease, what?" I was panting now, my heart was bursting out of my chest.

Taylor worried his lower lip with his teeth. "No disease in the world twists ribs into latticework. Whatever this thing is, it looks like it was supposed to grow this way. I don't even think it's bone. It feels almost like . . . I don't know. Coral."

"Coral?"

"Something."

"Jesus, Jesus Christ," and I pushed myself up. Latham looked after me and asked if I was all right; I barely heard her. The roaring in my head was louder now, and I staggered away, ran as only lame men run, disjointedly, agonizedly, until I found myself standing shaking before my grandparents' common headstone. I sat down on the ground between their graves to let my breathing slow and my heart stop racing, stared at the stone, tried to draw some comfort, some something, from the inscription, *Beloved in memory, Ralph Riddle, Mary Riddle.* All I could think of, however, was furry pale plastic skin draped from Rita's fingers, the bony white bulb inside the headpiece, the false tongue in the false mouth.

"Are you all right, Mister Riddle?"

I started. Gertrude Latham had followed me and was hovering concernedly.

"Just an anxiety attack." I punctuated the remark with a bark of mirthless laughter. "I'll be back in a moment." She choked on a reply to that, so I said it for her. "You think I shouldn't go back?"

She all but wrung her hands.

"If you people are playing practical jokes—"

"We would never, ever, play jokes!"

"Somebody's up to something here! If this is some kind of, of stunt, you, Taylor, the historical commission, none of you will ever see the end of trouble. I can promise you that."

"What do you think we'd possibly gain from a *stunt?*" she demanded hotly.

"Money, publicity, I don't know."

"There's no *money* in archeology, Mister Riddle," she said, biting off the words. "Certainly not in this kind of archeology! You think we do this to get rich, to be on television?"

I was about to snap back, but then I saw that she was really angry, too, as angry as I was, maybe angrier. I got a hold on myself and said, in as reasonable a voice as I could manage, "What *is* that thing?"

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"It's not a joke!"

"Well, it's something, and it doesn't belong. If it's not a joke and not a box full of junk—and it sure isn't human, or any animal, vegetable, mineral I've ever seen or heard about—"

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation," she said, obviously not convinced herself. "We'll be able to find out more when we get the . . . remains to the lab."

"Yeah? And how long will that take?"

"We'll have to get all kinds of permission. It's going to be very complicated. Anything you could tell us about this Doctor Sweeny could be very important."

"Doc Sweeny," I said, and had to pause to clear my throat loudly. My voice was lined with wet sand. "Doc Sweeny was the only doctor here for thirty years. My great-grandmother was at his funeral. She told me once the whole valley showed up to pay last respects. I don't know any more than what she told me and what's on his stone. He came here after the War Between the States. He died at the turn of the century."

She didn't say anything for several seconds. Then: "Where did he come *from?*"

"How would I know? Who knows if he ever said?"

"All right," she said, "then why did he come here?"

"Everybody's got to go somewhere."

"But why *here?* We're not talking about your standard-issue nineteenth-century country doctor. We're talking about . . . God, I don't *know* what we're talking about. A guy with plastic skin, latticework for ribs. A skull like, like—"

She couldn't find the right word, if there was a right word, and the sentence hung unfinished in the air between us until I said, "A skull like *something.* And a face like nothing. Those bones back there are the bones of a—"

"A Martian, for all anybody knows." She was embarrassed to have said that, and I was embarrassed to have heard her say it. I couldn't look at her again for several seconds, until I heard her suck in a breath like a sob and say, "Whatever he was, nobody caught on to him in thirty years. Thirty years! What was he doing here all the time?"

"Driving around the countryside in his buggy. Dispensing solicitude, advice, and placebos."

"No, what was he *really* doing? Gardner's small, isolated, even backward."

I could only nod. The roads hadn't been paved until the 1920s. There hadn't been plumbing and electricity in all the homes until the 1950s.

"There's no money to be made here," she went on, "and never has been."

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I nodded again.

"So why," she began, and hesitated.

"Maybe he was stranded. Maybe the place just suited him."

She appeared to mull that over for a moment, then nodded. "Who'd've bothered, who'd've been able, to check anybody's background in a place like this in eighteen seventy? Why else except that a doctor, someone claiming to be a doctor and willing to settle here, would've seemed like a godsend? He could've given them anything he wanted to give them and called it medicine."

I heard the roaring in my head again. I thought of my grandmother, breaking snap beans and humming, *Are you washed in the blood?* I murmured, "Or candy."

"What?"

The roaring in my head rose in pitch and blended into the incessant twirring of the cicadae. I thought suddenly that I knew the words to that song—it was a song of the need to obey the biological imperative; *Keep your genetic material in circulation,* the chorus went—and I suddenly felt cold and feverish at the same time.

I said, "What if," and then on second thought knew I could never go on and say what if Doc Sweeny had come to small, isolated, manageable Gardner from God knew where and become one of its citizens in order to become one *with* its citizens and had been accepted by them though the flesh of their children ever after twisted itself into knots trying to reject the alien matter he somehow had bequeathed to them, and those children, those who survived, had gone out into the world to pass along that same alien stuff to their children in turn, and—

So I said no more, only lurched past Gertrude Latham, and if she called after me, I didn't hear her. I wanted to be away from her and away from here, in my car, speeding homeward with the radio turned up and wind roaring past the open window. The waters could not close over Gardner soon enough to suit me. I didn't stop moving until I was through the cemetery gate, and then only because I put my bad foot in a shallow hole hidden in the grass and went down on one knee. The stab of pain in my leg and hip was so intense that I believed for a moment I was going to black out. Gasping, I dug my fingers into the earth, gripped it desperately. Maybe I was going to be sick anyway. ●

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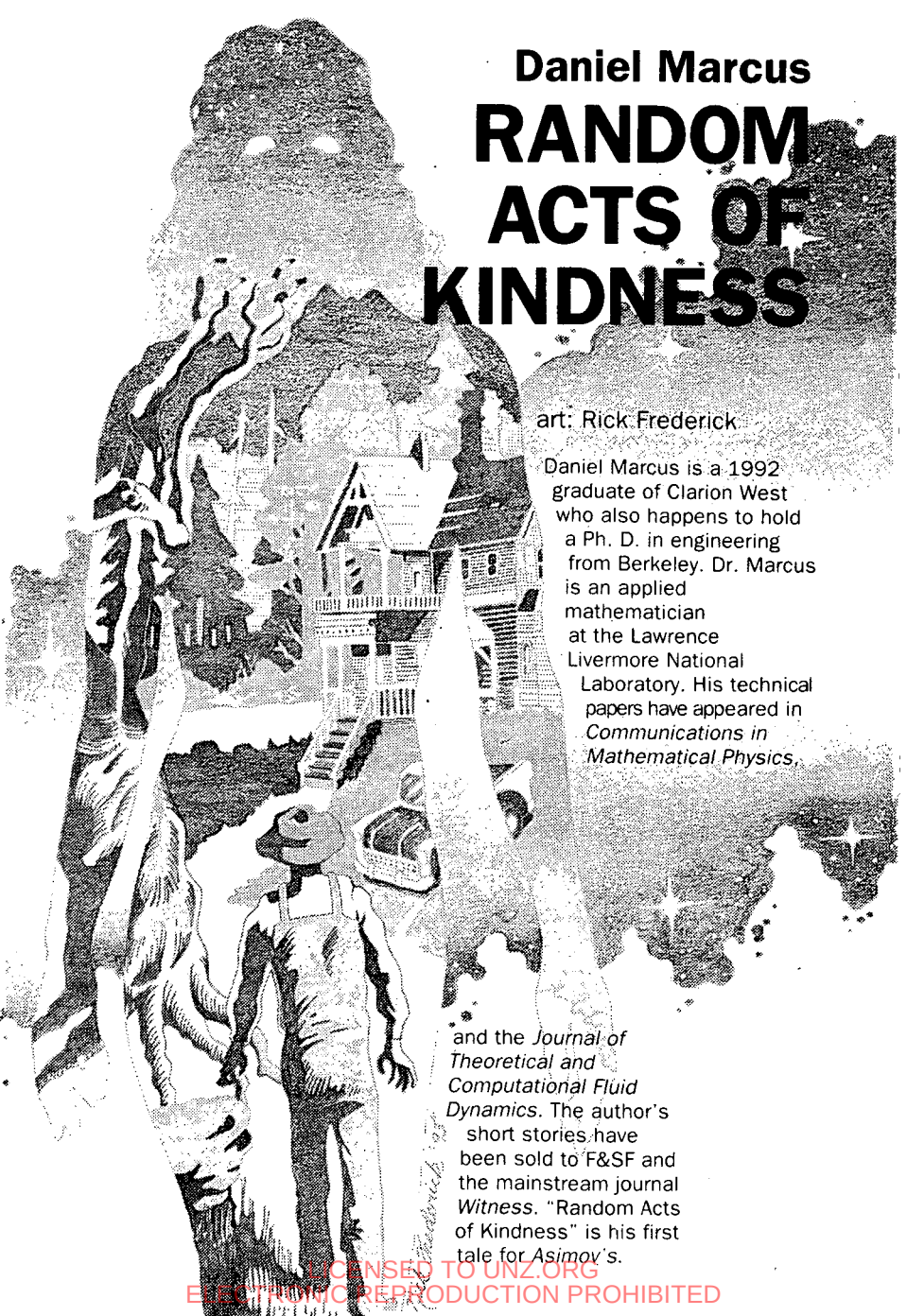

Daniel Marcus

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

art: Rick Frederick

Daniel Marcus is a 1992 graduate of Clarion West who also happens to hold a Ph. D. in engineering from Berkeley. Dr. Marcus is an applied mathematician at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. His technical papers have appeared in *Communications in Mathematical Physics*, and the *Journal of Theoretical and Computational Fluid Dynamics*. The author's short stories have been sold to F&SF and the mainstream journal *Witness*. "Random Acts of Kindness" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

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The fog brought me a gift this morning. When I woke in the pre-dawn stillness to relieve myself, it lay over everything like cotton ticking. I stepped out onto the porch and held my hand in front of my face. I could barely see it, a splayed dark outline, the space between the fingers like webbing in the half-dark.

I went back to sleep, and, when I awoke again, the fog was thinner. Not completely gone, but the sky had that bright gray look. There was blue up there somewhere. On the porch railing, next to a small potted cactus, was the head of a mountain lion. There was a dark, irregular stain on the wood underneath it, and the fur around what was left of its neck was torn and bloody. Its eyes were open, and its mouth was fixed in a snarl. As I watched, an ant crawled up the matted fur of its cheek, explored for a moment, and disappeared into a nostril.

Even in death, there was something magnificent about the creature, and I thought of Egyptian gods in hieroglyphic profile. I looked beyond it to the sloping, rock-studded hill disappearing into the fog, which was still hugging the ground.

I had been looking for that cat. In the last month, I'd lost two sheep, and the day before, I'd come home to find my goat, Mama Cass, lying in a pool of blood, eviscerated and partly eaten. There was no sign, nothing to track—the killer left about as much spoor as the fog.

I walked to the head of the rickety wooden stairs and looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever or whatever had graced me with this offering, knowing that I wouldn't. I had an urge to shout, just to hear my voice damped, absorbed into that mist like rain into dry dust. I didn't see anything I didn't expect—just the fog, the gentle contours of the hillside, and off to the left, just visible through the whiteness, my old blue Chevy rustbucket, sitting under a listing, tin-roofed lean-to.

Beyond the truck were the woods. They went on for miles, almost all the way to the ocean, uninterrupted except for patches of clearcut. I remember, years ago, flying low over the coastal range in a small private plane, seeing miles of deep, mysterious green scarred and broken by wide swaths of nothing. Dead zones. It made me want to cry. Not too much of that this far out in the boonies, but the lumber companies and the Feds managed to make a sorry mess of things before they stopped. Before everything stopped.

I was hungry, and debated with myself whether to make something before heading down the mountain, or wait until I got to Stores. I never liked to pass up an opportunity to sit down to some of Evy's hash, but I was going to be bartering for gasoline to keep my generator going and needed a clear head, so I went back to the kitchen and grabbed an oatcake to give my blood sugar a kick. On my way out, I stopped at the hall closet and got the box of .22 longs that I planned to use for trade. There was

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only about a case and a half left, and I felt a sharp stab of worry as I wondered what I was going to use for currency when that was gone. I didn't want to think about it. Under a tarp in the back of the truck, there was also a small buck I'd bagged the day before. That and the ammo should get me five gallons at least, maybe a box of nails.

As I walked out through the porch again, breaking off crumbs of cake and putting them in my mouth, I took another look at the cathead. It had lost most of its magic for me and just looked dead, the eyes glazed over, the fur taking on the dull gloss of old carpet. I felt a chill run down my spine, though, as I wondered again how it got there. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end.

The truck was hard starting. There was always fog up here, and I think that the dampness got into the electrical system somehow. It turned over and over, but wouldn't quite catch. Just when the starter was about to call it quits, cranking slower and slower and groaning with the effort, the engine kicked in. I saw a cloud of blue smoke rise in the rear view mirror and mix with the fog. I opened the glove compartment and took out my Walther, took the safety off, and jacked a shell in the chamber. I laid it gently on the seat next to me. I thought of Annie, and pushed the thought away. Two years since she died, and I was still hurting. Everything in the house and the rough land around it shouted her name at me.

The road wound down the mountains, hugging the contours, switchbacking a couple of times. I could drive it in my sleep. By the time the hardpack dirt gave way to asphalt, I was out from under the fog, and I could see plumes of woodsmoke rising from behind the curve of the next hill. As I rounded its side, the twin windmills that provided power for the little community came into view—tall, spidery things perched at the mouth of the valley like birds of prey. Only one of them was spinning—the other was down again, waiting for a trader to make the long trip up from Tehachapi with spare parts.

I pulled up in front of the trading post, a low, ramshackle building with a sprawling collection of additions. There were a couple of trailers off to the side, and a long aluminum storage shed. A neatly lettered sign reading "Stores" hung over the main entrance. Behind the main building, scattered throughout the woods and down the road, were about thirty houses, most of them new—makeshift dwellings that sprouted up around Stores like mushrooms on nightsoil after they got the windmills going. It was still pretty early, and the dirt lot in front of the shed was empty. I stuck the Walther in my belt and walked in.

Evy was behind the counter. She was wearing a rough homespun shirt, and her long gray-streaked hair was pulled back into a thick braid. Behind her, pots and saucepans perched on Coleman burners, filling the

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room with the smells of chili, chicory, and kerosene. Through a door next to the stove, I saw a jumbled confusion of merchandise—bolts of cloth, tools, barrels of dry goods. There was a single customer, someone I'd never seen before. He wore a scarf over his head that didn't quite cover an ugly burn scar, and he sat hunched over his joe like he thought someone was going to take it away from him. Evy smiled when she saw me.

"Blair," she said. "How goes it?" There was a gold star inlaid into one of her front teeth and it flashed at me as she spoke.

"Some strange shit, Ev'." I told her about the offering I'd received. When I was finished, she rolled her eyes and whistled softly through her teeth. "Thing *is* though," I went on, "I don't know whether to feel threatened or graced. I mean, I *wanted* that cat, but this is pretty damn strange."

As I talked, the stranger became more and more agitated, mumbling to himself and slopping his chicory on the counter in front of him. Finally, he turned to me. The burn scar sprawled across his face like an open hand. His eyes, peering out from behind it, held a sick, flickering light.

"It's *happening*, man," he said. "They're coming back! Cowboy Neal at the wheel, man. Four-dimensional beings in three-dimensional bodies, looking out two-dimensional windshields! Ashes to ashes, man. They're coming *back*."

I looked at Evy with a questioning frown. She shrugged and pointed down, meaning, I guess, that she figured he had come up from the south, from the ruins around Sacto or San Francisco. People didn't travel much anymore, but we still got a steady trickle—techno-junk traders, musicians, storytellers, and the occasional crazy.

"I *seen* it, man. It's happened to *me*. I was up to Shasta, up near the summit, and I got caught in a storm." Something happened to his eyes then—the fevered light dimmed, and he seemed almost sane. "Man, I had half a biscuit in my pocket and the shirt on my *back*, and the temperature dropped from sixty to zero in about twenty minutes. I thought, 'This is it, man. Thank you, Great Spirit for giving me this life, see you in the next one,' you know?" I nodded. I knew about those storms—he wasn't exaggerating. Evy had stopped wiping down the counter and was staring at him.

"Before long it was total whiteout," he continued. "Nowhere to go, so I just sat down right where I was, closed my eyes, and waited. Pretty soon my feet and hands got all numb and I just went to sleep." He giggled. "I just went to *sleep*, man." He shook his head and stared down into his mug. He was silent for so long I didn't know if he was going to continue speaking. "I just went to sleep," he said again, so softly that it was almost

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inaudible. He looked up at me and grinned. "You think I'm gonna tell you I dreamed this long tunnel with a bright light at the end, right?"

I shrugged, and he shook his head. "Nothin', man. No dreams at all, but I woke up in the old abandoned base camp cabin at the foot of the northwest approach. A good ten miles away. There was a fire in the stove and a big fat squirrel on the table next to it, gutted and cleaned and ready to cook. And standing there looking down at me was God's own angel. She was an *angel,* man. . . ." Evy looked at me and rolled her eyes. He didn't seem to notice. "She gave me this slow, sad smile, like she *knew* me, and then she turned and walked out the door. I remember the smells in the room, man—blood and woodsmoke."

He looked at Evy, then back at me, with a defiant expression, like he was daring us to call him crazy.

He beckoned me closer. "You know who I think it was?" he asked. I shook my head. He continued without pausing for an answer. "There were *spirits* who lived here, before we came and fucked it all up. Spirits. Gods. The Indians knew them, and they had sort of a peaceful thing going. Then *we* came and started tearing down the forests and pissing in the streams, and they went into hiding. I think they were always still *there,* but they kept a low profile. Then the shit hit the fan and we almost blew ourselves off the planet. And now they're coming *back,* man. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Evy said. "If that's true, don't you think they'd be a little, well, pissed off? Why would they *help* us?" I'd been thinking the same thing.

He shook his head. "You don't get it, man. They're not like *us.* They don't hold grudges. It's a clean slate—we can all start over. A clean slate. . . ."

Then something in his face sagged, and he looked back down into his mug. Evy and I looked at each other and shrugged.

"We've got some business to transact, Evy," I said after a long moment.

"What you got?" she asked.

We went through the motions of dickering and barter, but neither of our hearts were in it. I got my five gallons, she got the .22 longs, and she agreed to salt all the meat and give me half. Somewhere during the course of the negotiations, our friend had disappeared.

"Hey," I said. "Where's Cowboy Neal?"

"Beats me," she said, with a shrug. "Probably stepped out to score some 'shrooms."

"No shit," I said. "The band's playing, but the amps aren't plugged in."

She chuckled softly. "Rock and roll will never die. You think there's anything to his story?"

"Fuck if *I* know," I said. "I did wake up with a cathead on my porch, but I think our friend's been smoking a little too much Humboldt Polio

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Weed." I was trying to make light of it, but there was something nagging at a corner of my mind, and it wouldn't let go. I had heard similar stories, especially since the war. Impossible rescues, strange gifts left in the dead of night. . . .

I spent the afternoon in the "machine shop" at Stores—little more than a garage with an old lathe, a hoist, and a meager collection of hand tools—helping Jacob Ross tear down and rebuild a generator. Jacob was Stores's resident doctor, Evy's Significant Something-or-Other, and he was pretty good with his hands. He had patched me up more than once, and had done all he could to save my wife Annie when she took two rounds in the chest from a .357 Magnum. A biker gang, up from what was left of Oakland. He wasn't a miracle worker, though—the life leaked out of her slowly but steadily, and she was gone before the night was through.

It was good working with him. We knew each other well and there was an economy of words and motion that made the work seem almost like a dance. I told him about the macabre gift I'd received and about Cowboy Neal, and he just grunted and nodded. It was pretty much what I needed to hear from him. By the time I got back up the mountain to my place, the shadows were starting to lengthen and the high clouds in the western sky were streaked with gold fire.

The cathead was still on my porch, and the ants had been having a field day. A line of them stretched up the side of the porch to the railing, and the head itself was teeming with them. There was a cloud of flies circling and buzzing, and a whiff of decay hung in the air. I wrapped a kerchief around my hand, grabbed the head by an ear, and tossed it as hard and far as I could. It bounced a couple of times and rolled into the woods. Like ringing the dinner bell for the 'coons and skunks, but I just wanted it out of my sight. I got some water from the reclamation tank and washed down the railing.

I'd been thinking about Annie again on the drive back and missing her more than a little. I decided to pay her a visit. First, though, I wanted to leave something in case my visitor showed up again. I looked around the living room, and settled on the God's-eye hanging over the mantle—black and yellow yarn wound around the arms of a rude wooden cross to form a textured pattern of concentric diamonds. The arms of the cross were tipped with hawk feathers. Annie made it the summer before she died. I didn't know why, but it seemed right. I brought it out to the porch and laid it on the railing where the cathead had been.

Annie wasn't far, just about a half-mile further up the mountain, but it was deep woods, and I maintained the trail as lightly as possible—just enough to let me find my way. She would have wanted it like that.

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It was one of those clearings that just opens up out of the woods like God lifting the lid from a teakettle. About half an acre of green so deep it hurt the eyes, peppered with wildflowers in the spring, studded with an array of smooth boulders perfect for sitting. It had been a favorite place of ours, even before the war. Her grave was near the uphill end of the clearing, marked by a sort of mandala of small stones, a simple spiral set into the rich earth.

Some people talk to their departed loved ones. I couldn't do it. It was too much like wishing for something that could never happen. I liked to be near her sometimes, though, when I needed to be alone with my thoughts. I sat on a boulder near her grave, stretched my legs out, and remembered . . .

. . . being out on San Francisco Bay in a sailboat under a perfect blue sky, the wind ripping through my hair, fingers completely numb. I remembered ice cream, the cold sweetness, the way the really good stuff sort of coated your tongue and the back of your mouth. I remembered what it felt like to play an old Martin, the rosewood fretboard silky beneath my callused fingers, the rich harmonics ringing out underneath the chords, vibrating the body of the guitar. . . .

In all of those images, Annie was there somewhere just outside my field of vision. I began to get that tight feeling across my forehead, like I was about to cry, and before long my shoulders were shaking with dry sobs. After a while, the tightness went away and my breathing returned to normal. I took a last look at Annie's grave, and walked back down the meadow to where the trail disappeared into the woods.

As I made my way along the overgrown path, I had a distinct feeling that I was being watched. I stopped and looked around. It was almost dark, and the woods were deep in purple shadow. The mosquitoes were out, and they hovered around me in a cloud. Off to the left, I heard the deep drone of a wild beehive. The air smelled of pine and leaf mold. Nothing. I thought wistfully for a moment of my Walther, lying in the glove compartment in my truck.

By the time I got home, it was pitch dark and my neck was sore from looking over my shoulder. The God's-eye lay on the railing where I'd left it. I made myself some dinner, and, afterward, brewed myself a pot of coffee from my dwindling hoard. I brought it out onto the porch and settled into the big wicker chair to wait. I had a long night ahead of me. As an afterthought, I went down to the truck and got the Walther out of the glove compartment. I didn't think I'd need it, but I was still a bit spooked from my walk and I had learned to trust my intuition.

I leaned back and looked up at the sky. There was a pretty good aurora. We'd been getting a lot of those since the war—gauzy, iridescent curtains hanging cold fire from the heavens. There were a lot of shooting stars,

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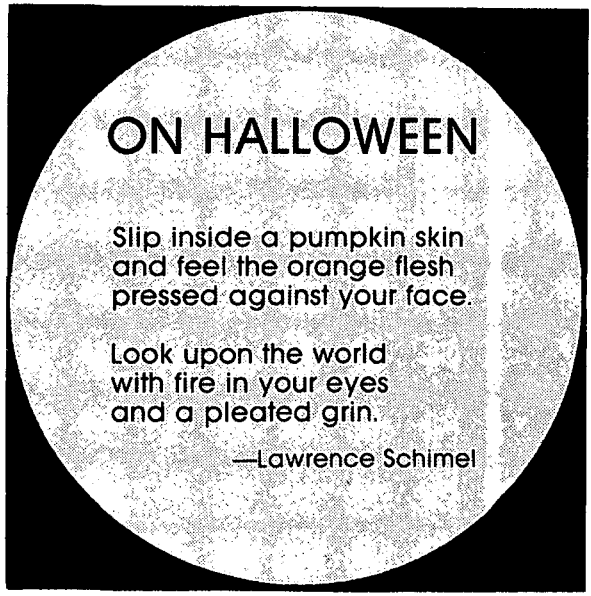
too, and at one point I saw a dim light make a slow, steady crawl across the sky. Probably Space Station Kyoto. I didn't think there was anybody up there any more, but I wasn't sure. I felt a sharp sadness at the thought.

I must have dozed off, because when I woke up, the sky was beginning to take on that colorless pre-dawn shade, just before the light starts pushing itself up from the East. There was Someone on the porch with me. I couldn't make out her features very well (I knew somehow that it was a "her"), but I had a sense of fine cheekbones, of grace and slenderness. And I knew that she was not human. I reached behind me and rested my hand on the cold hardness of the gun.

She stepped forward, out of the shadows. Huge, liquid eyes, catching the dim light like a cat. Body covered in a fine layer of glistening fur. I wanted to reach out and touch it. She wore no clothing and she smelled faintly of ginger.

She picked up the God's-eye and held it up in front of her face. She rotated it around a quarter-turn, then back, then she laid it gently back on the railing. She looked at me then. Cowboy Neal's words echoed in my mind. *It's a clean slate, man.* With a falling sensation, I lifted my hand from the gun and met her gaze. Behind her, on the mountain, the fog was coming in. ●



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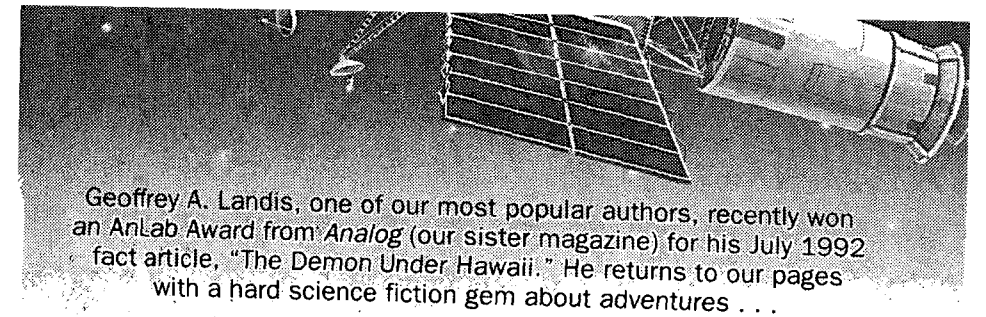

Geoffrey A. Landis, one of our most popular authors, recently won an AnLab Award from *Analog* (our sister magazine) for his July 1992 fact article, "The Demon Under Hawaii." He returns to our pages with a hard science fiction gem about adventures . . .

IN THE HOLE WITH THE BOYS WITH THE TOYS

Geoffrey A. Landis

art: Randy Asplund-Faith

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The aero-shroud was ready to be closed over the satellite when the Kazakh technician looked it over one more time and saw something. "Hey," he said. "One minute here. What is *this?*" He walked around, reached a finger in between an antenna and a support bracket, and fished out one end of a long bright orange streamer. "Shouldn't we remove this?"

The satellite was enormous, with complex antenna mounts, wiring harnesses, and solar arrays folded up into stowed position, ready to be covered by the fairing for launch. An orange streamer was quite definitely out of place. The tag said, "Remove before launch" in English, Spanish, and Russian. It was odd. Russian satellites never had streamers to remove, but then, this one wasn't one of their own; it was for a paying customer, and they could make their satellites any way they wanted to, as long as they had hard currency. The pad supervisor looked it over, shrugged, and picked up the phone.

Launch-pad support said to wait. The contractor team had left, but after a while they found a higher-level administrator. They could hear a quick burst of conversation in French and German. The administrator translated this into English for the Russian supervisor. The supervisor put down the phone. "He said, if the tag says to remove before launch, take it off, and note it in the log."

"Right." The tech found a pair of scissors and carefully cut the streamer away.

The launch was flawless. With the half-trillion rubles that South American Regional Communications was paying them—even with inflation, still a hefty sum—it had better be.

"Two diamonds," Cherokee Bill said, leaning his chair back against one of the back-up battle-management radar screens. "You guys see how NASA screwed up again?"

Cherokee Bill was a tall skinny lieutenant with round black glasses and skin the color of root beer. If he had any Cherokee blood, it didn't show. His real name was William Ali Singer, but the only way you'd ever find that out was by looking up his service records—he'd never admit to it, or answer to the name. But then, everybody in the hole had a nickname. Something about the job.

"Pass," said Honker. He held his cards about an inch away from his chin, as if worried somebody might be trying to sneak a glance at them. "So what else is new?"

"The Sarca-sat rescue mission? That's not NASA. It's private," said Just-Plain-Bob, staring with a frown at his hand. Just-Plain-Bob was the token Canadian, in the hole to show that the missile defense program was an international peacekeeping facility, rather than just another

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show of U.S. techno-machismo. He was an RCAF lieutenant, short and neatly dressed, with clean-cropped sandy-blond hair. His chin always looked like he'd just finished shaving, despite the fact that it was nearly a sacred tradition for the guys down the hole to grow beards to show their months underground. "Two no-trump." He had royal crapola, and no diamonds worth mentioning, but Cherokee's bid was a one-round force, so he had to bid something, even though he knew full well that Cherokee always overbid.

"Pass," said Poot-face, a cheerful, round-faced second lieutenant who took on himself the task of keeping all the electronics in top shape. "How could you miss it? Just turn on the damn television, it's on every damn channel." Poot folded his hand into a neat pile, dropped it on the table, and turned his back to them to watch the video feed from NORAD. One of them was supposed to be on the screens at all times, not that anything was about to happen anytime soon.

"Sure you can blame NASA," Cherokee said. He glanced over to watch Poot-face, who was messing with the target acquisition radar, then looked back at Just-Plain-Bob. "NASA launched her; you can bet they'd take the credit if the rescue succeeded. So it's only fair to let 'em share the blame when it's a screw-up."

"Their part worked fine," Just-Plain-Bob objected mildly. He was the new guy in the hole, his first time on the two-month rotation in the underground command room. "It was the Frenchies who made the apogee-kick motor that screwed up."

"So NASA shoutn'a let them launch that knocked-together excuse for a LEO to GEO in the first place," said Cherokee. He turned to Poot-face. "Say, you gonna pass, or you just gonna sit there playing with those knobs like a two-year-old?"

"I did pass."

"Well, do it louder." Cherokee Bill didn't bother to look at his hand again. He was barely a year out of ROTC, and already thought he knew everything. "Four diamonds."

Honker passed. Wants me to name a major, thought Just-Plain-Bob. Heck with him. Cherokee always overbid; let him play the thing. "Pass."

Cherokee Bill threw down his hand. "You scum," he said. "We could have gone to slam, you dim-wit."

"You bought it, you play it."

"Hey," said Poot-face. "You guys want to take a look at her?"

"What have you got?" said Cherokee.

Poot-face was fiddling with the fine-focus, glancing up at the high-resolution monitor and then back down to the knobs. The go-room was filled with large and small CRT displays, but the big high-res monitor was the important one, hooked directly to the big eyeball. He talked

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without looking back at them. "That NASA astronaut stranded in transfer orbit. I got her on the eye. Wanna take a look?"

"Heck, yes!" said Cherokee.

"ESA, not NASA," said Just-Plain-Bob. He glanced at the status display, and saw that Poot-face had the clamshell covers retracted from all seven segments of the eye. The picture ought to be good.

The eye was half of the reason that they were on twenty-four-hour watch in a bomb-proof room half a mile under Nevada. It was an array of seven telescopes, each one with a mirror four meters in diameter, nearly as large as the big mirror at Mount Palomar. But what made this telescope unique was not the size. It was the fact that each mirror consisted of ten thousand tiny facets, each one an individual telescope mirror the size of a highly polished potato chip, each individually controlled by a tiny microprocessor to a precision of one one-hundredth of a wavelength of sodium light. The result was that the mirrors could adapt to the atmosphere, correcting the distortions produced by turbulence and temperature gradients, to produce diffraction-limited performance. This gave the telescope a view as clear as if the atmosphere weren't there at all, sharp and steady as if it were in outer space. It would have been the finest telescope in the world—if it weren't the finest weapon in the world.

As a weapon, it had never been used.

The weapon was the other half of the reason why they were there. It was a ten-megawatt free-electron laser, driven by a compact radio-frequency linac. On and running, it would produce intense bursts of coherent infrared. They could track incoming missiles with the telescope, focus the telescope precisely on the most vulnerable portions of the warheads. Then, the laser beam would be directed along the reverse optical path of the telescope. With the atmospheric distortion exactly canceled out, the beam would converge from the seven mirrors to focus to a perfect ten-centimeter spot on the target. It wouldn't vaporize the warhead—no laser in the world could do that—but it would heat a thin surface layer instantly into vapor. The shock-wave of the reaction would destroy the delicate electronics of the warhead.

In theory, anyway. It had never actually been tested. Politically, the four of them could argue about almost anything, but one of the few things they did agree on—even Just-Plain-Bob—was that America was pretty screwed-up when the idiot politicians would make the Air Force spend a hundred billion dollars on a facility, and then forbid them to fire even a single test shot to see if it worked. They would sit in the hole and watch obsolete satellites fly by, fuel tanks, decades-old spent apogee stages; they could count every spot of chipped paint and each debris crater. They could aim . . . but they had been strictly warned that a crew that had a notion to turn the arming key on the big zapper would find themselves

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at the wrong-end of a court-martial, and the very best they could hope for would be to receive a permanent posting in a location that would make their two-month shift underground look like a week in Waikiki.

"High tech in action, wah-hoo," Cherokee Bill had said, after his first shift on the boards, the first day he spent down the hole a month ago. Poot-face and Honker had already been there three weeks. "To think, I volunteered for this. Shoot."

"Bang," said Poot-face.

"Join the Air Force, see the world," said Honker.

"Yeah . . . the underside of the world," Cherokee Bill agreed.

They weren't, strictly, allowed to focus the eye on active satellites without official permission, and most certainly not on manned spacecraft, but that part of the regulations had rather quickly been ignored. There just wasn't a whole lot to do when you were sitting underground for two months, waiting for World War Three.

"Ooh, la-lah," said Poot. He stepped back and gestured to the screen like Vanna White offering a choice of brand-name products. "Feast your eyeballs, fellows. Girl-watching rises to new heights: outer space!"

"That's it? Man, that Frog spaceship's got a bad case of the uglies," said Cherokee Bill. "No wonder it don't work; it's ashamed." It was a rather ugly spacecraft, as such things went. No astronaut was visible, girl or otherwise. The blunt conical shape of the capsule and re-entry vehicle sat bolted crudely onto one end of an aluminum truss studded with equipment. They watched it rotate slowly on the high-definition display. It was in infrared false-color, but they were all so used to reading false-color images that it no longer seemed strange. They identified batteries, a small solar array, power conditioners, cryo tanks, a radiator, reaction control units, two communications antennas, a grappling arm, a compact doppler radar. The other end of the short truss held a cylindrical solid rocket motor with a standard bell nozzle. This was the source of all the trouble.

Or, more accurately, the most recent in a long string of failures.

They were quite well-informed down in the hole, despite being a hundred miles from nowhere, Nevada; but then, they had the time to be. Cherokee Bill got the electronic edition of the New York *Times* sent down the wire, and read it front-to-back for two hours every day. Just-Plain-Bob preferred his own Toronto *Star,* but read it mostly for the local news and the comics. Poot and Honker got their news from the tube. The hole tapped downloads from eleven satellites, and they didn't charge extra for premium channels, either.

The doomed astronaut had been trained by ESA—the European Space Agency—but she was working on a privately funded mission.

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Sarca—South America Regional Communications, A.G.—was a German consortium that had bought the last big piece of unclaimed radio spectrum in the crowded geosynchronous band over South America. They had proposed a single, gigantic communications satellite, three times the size of any satellite ever sent up to geosynch, to service all of South America. It was a good idea, perhaps, but they'd picked the wrong company to build it.

Sarca picked a company new to the communications satellite business, one that had deliberately lowballed the bid in a try to gain the prestige of the big contract as a lure for new business. They delivered twenty months late . . . and the satellite didn't meet specs. Four years after the delivery date, the satellite was finally ready, but the Ariane-V that had been scheduled to launch it had long since been sold to another customer and launched, and the next open launch slot was three years away. Unfortunately, the ruling of the International Telecommunications Union was that the frequency allocation would only be held open for five years. If Sarca didn't get their bird up in a year, they would be out of luck.

Their back-up was a Russian Energia launch. Their problems seemed to be over when the satellite was placed into a perfect geosynchronous orbit.

Unfortunately, the satellite wouldn't deploy.

The problem, in retrospect, was right there in the log books. For shipping the satellite to Russia, fifteen braces had been bolted onto it to keep the fragile movable parts from moving during shipment. Each brace had a large orange streamer attached, telling the integration team to remove it before launch. Fourteen of them had been removed according to specs. By an oversight, the page of the manual revision which instructed the crew to remove the fifteenth brace had been garbled. The Kazakh launch crew had finally found the bright-orange streamer attached to the brace, with the tell-tale warning in large letters: "remove before launch" . . . and had neatly cut away the streamer with a scissors. The Russians blamed the Kazakhs; the Kazakhs put the blame on improper instructions from the satellite maker; the satellite maker blamed the Russians and the Germans.

The brace that had not been removed continued to do its job, which was to prevent the main uplink antenna array from moving into position.

Sarca had sunk about five billion marks into the venture at this point. They weren't about to let a misplaced shipping brace stop them.

The ready room was brightly lit, with walls and control panels painted in screaming primary colors; the psych boys had insisted on it. It looked like a kindergarten computer camp. No trouble seeing the cards, though.

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When they got bored watching the broken spacecraft on the monitor and picked up their cards again, Honker led a low trump. Just-Plain-Bob spread out the dummy. "Have fun, big guy." An RCAF scholarship and then three years of working his way up the technical ladder, for this. A chance to play bridge all day long. And to think, he'd thought that if he joined the Air Force, he'd get to fly planes. Just-Plain-Bob sighed, and turned back to watch the screens. Poot had set the zapper to target the stranded ESA astronaut, and the aim spot of the laser blinked onto the slowly rotating spacecraft at half-second intervals while it slowly dwindled toward apogee.

Honker's trump lead hadn't been very wise, but Cherokee blew an easy overtrick trying to set up an unnecessary squeeze, and had to scramble to make his contract. "JP, you shoulda bid clubs, you scum-sucking pisswort."

"Yeah, sure," said Just-Plain-Bob. "And you'da gone to slam and we'd be down two."

"In clubs? I'd try to finesse instead of the squeeze." Cherokee Bill scooped up the cards and handed them to Honker. "Say, you still watching that French girl?"

"Belgian." Just-Plain-Bob shrugged. "What else? You didn't think I'd watch *you* play, did you?"

"So call her for a date, why don't you? She's not going anywhere." Cherokee Bill leaned his chair back and looked over at the screen. "So you got the hots for yon damsel in distress? I got an idea. Be a white knight and rescue her, she'll melt into your arms, count on it."

"Yeah, right."

"Hey," said Honker. "You guys watching the tube, or you want me to deal?"

"Shaddup, Honker," said Cherokee Bill. "I'm having an idea. This is hot, guys, hot."

"Yeah, right," said Just-Plain-Bob.

The Sarca-sat thing had just gone from bad to worse. There was a long tradition of NASA renting out the space-shuttle to come to the rescue of screwed-up satellites. It made a few dollars for the space agency, gave the shuttle a mission, and, what was at least as important, gave the agency some good press. So it was natural for the Sarca consortium to take their request to NASA.

Unfortunately, NASA said no. The satellite had made it into geosynchronous Earth orbit—GEO—before it screwed up, and the shuttle was strictly a low-orbit bird. GEO was about twenty thousand miles higher than the highest orbit that the shuttle could reach. In fact, no astronauts had ever visited GEO. The orbit itself wasn't so bad; it was at the outer

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fringes of the outermost radiation belt, but the transfer orbit passed right through the middle of the belts. Not a problem, as long as you pass through quickly, as the Apollo missions did on the way to the moon.

NASA wasn't interested, but the European Space Agency had some ideas. ESA had been hurt pretty badly by the bad publicity when they had canceled Hermes, their own too-expensive space-plane project; they had astronauts to spare, and were in need of a space spectacular of their own. They proposed a manned rescue mission to geosynchronous orbit.

ESA worked hand in hand with NASA, buying shuttle flights for their modules, flying their own astronauts and their own experiments, building a lab module for the space station. They had a capsule all ready, a small manned capsule designed for crew return from Earth orbit, built to fit into the shuttle bay. All they needed was to add three small rocket engines; one to boost it out of the shuttle orbit into the transfer orbit, one to circularize it at geosynchronous orbit while the astronaut removed the errant brace, and one to take the astronaut back out of orbit. The repair-astronaut wouldn't return to shuttle orbit, but would just reenter right from GEO; the heat shield on the capsule was sized to do the job. The rocket engines needed were off-the-shelf parts, solid-fuel Payload Assist Motors; all that they needed was to be bolted onto some sort of framework.

ESA was so hot for the mission that they offered to do their part of it for free, as a "test of space repair capability." All that the Sarca consortium had to pay for was the shuttle launch to get the whole thing into low orbit.

But the Sarca-sat was just destined for bad luck. Not one, but two out of three PAM motors failed. The only one which worked was the first one, the one which put the ESA astronaut into the transfer orbit through the radiation belts. The one which put her into an orbit that no vehicle could reach in time.

A rescue mission to rescue the rescue mission was the obvious suggestion, but it was going to take too long. The problem was the radiation belts. The vehicle passed through the Van Allen belts twice each orbit, five times a day. A single passage through the belts was no problem; a day's exposure only microscopically dangerous. But cumulatively, the effect was prolonged death. There was just no way to get any sort of rescue mission together before the astronaut would have a lethal dose.

"You, an *idea?*" said Just-Plain-Bob. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on a—now dark—radar console, from long habit knowing the spot to put his feet to avoid anything important like the fire control computers or the telescope adjustments. "Be still, my beating heart. I can't wait. About what?"

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"You know the old saying: to a man who's got nothing but a hammer, every problem looks like a nail," said Cherokee Bill. "You ever heard of laser ablation?"

Just-Plain-Bob shrugged. "What we've got is a laser, so the problem must look like a target." But he'd heard of laser ablation, all right, and it started him to thinking.

"Yeah, right—we blow her out of the sky?" said Honker. "Gets rid of the PR problem of having an astronaut die of radiation exposure on world-wide TV, but how do you get them to see it that way?"

"I told you, Honker," said Cherokee Bill. "Laser ablation."

"He means," said Just-Plain-Bob, "that he wants to aim the laser to a spot on one side of her spacecraft. Metal boils away where we zap it, right? What's a rocket engine, but just material being ejected at high velocity into space? So the result is, if we hit it on one side, it gets pushed away to the other."

"Yes, yes, that's it," Cherokee Bill said. "What he said. She needs a rocket engine; we make her one."

"But old Cherokee isn't very clever," continued Just-Plain-Bob. "Or he'd realize that there's a much simpler solution."

"Yeah? What's that, JP?"

"Easy." Just-Plain-Bob smiled, adopting the tone of a kindergarten teacher explaining the obvious to slow children. "See, she's already *got* a perfectly good rocket engine. She's got the PAM right there—it's the igniter that doesn't work, not the engine. All we need is to have her point the backside toward us. We can fire the zapper up her nozzle. Hit that rocket propellant with a strong enough laser pulse, she's sure to light."

Cherokee Bill went utterly silent for a moment, staring at him. "JP, you son of a gun, I think you just might have stumbled on to something here. I mean, I don't think we're just flinging bovine byproduct any more. This could really work. I mean, this could *really work.*"

"I know it would work," said Just-Plain-Bob. "I said it, didn't I? Reach out and torch someone."

Cherokee Bill shook his head. "I'm serious here, JP. This is real." He got up and went to the hotline, the direct link to NORAD.

"Uh, hold on a second, Bill," said Honker. He grabbed the phone away from Cherokee. Just-Plain-Bob looked on in amusement. "Let's think this over, why don't we? Let's not get rash."

Cherokee Bill snatched the phone away and held it out of reach. There was no need to dial; the line only went one place. He waited for it to be answered. "Come on, baby, light my *fire!*"

It wasn't quite that easy. The big difficulty was in the fact that the missile defense program was classified. A soft secret, as it happened,

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since the department of defense was pretty good at leaking tidbits to Congress when their budget needed it, and a secret told to Congress winds up in the Washington *Post* just as soon as a Senator needs a friend in the press. But still officially a secret, and not even the Joint Chiefs could declassify a facility of this size in a day. This meant that the idea couldn't be run through the normal channels, and also that it couldn't be tried in simulation, with engineers and technicians to criticize the results and suggest failure modes.

It took another orbit and a half, three passages through the radiation belts, to come to an agreement to try it. Everyone finally agreed that the situation called for desperate measures, even if the measures couldn't be described in public. The astronaut was instructed to orient the spacecraft in a particular direction as the spacecraft passed apogee, and was told that the ground crew would be trying "something new."

Down in the hole, the fax machine clicked on with an authorization to power up laser for "test firings as necessary at in-space targets discussed," concluding with a reminder that the facility and the mission were still top secret. Cherokee Bill picked up the message and read it. "Hey, signed by two generals and an admiral. Look at this. They let us haul her derrière out of the fire, but are they going to give us credit? Boys, we're *getting* robbed."

"Hey, that's the way 'top secret' works," said Just-Plain-Bob. He was already flicking on the switches that started cooling water flowing to the thyratrons and the kick-start laser. Near apogee, the image of the spacecraft on the high-res screen was not nearly as sharp as it had been earlier, but the radars had a good lock on it, and you could see the spacecraft had stopped its barbeque-mode rotation to start a slow pitch to point the motor groundward. "It's like the '64 Air Force mission to the moon—you want to be on the cutting edge, you gotta live with secrecy."

Poot-Face looked up. "What Air Force mission to the moon?"

"See?"

Cherokee Bill shrugged. "We got the fax authorizing us to fire at the target. Let's do it. Either it works, or it don't."

It didn't.

"Boy, oh, boy," said Poot-Face. "Did you *see* that thing blow up? Like a Roman candle! Let 'em tell us our laser doesn't work *now!*"

Cherokee Bill didn't say anything, just watched the video feed replay over and over. Just-Plain-Bob had his head buried in his hands. Honker was repeating, over and over, "We're screwed. We're dog-meat now. Oh, we're *really* screwed. We're *dog*-meat. . . ."

"Shut up, Honker," said Cherokee Bill.

"We're dog-meat," said Honker. "They gotta blame somebody, and it's

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gonna be *us*. I didn't have anything to do with it, but they won't see it that way. They're going to . . . "

Just-Plain-Bob lifted his head out of his hands. "Shut up, Honker. They can't blame us. We're top-secret; they'd have to *acknowledge* us before they could *blame* us. Now quiet up, let me think."

"Think? About what? The fun times we'll have inspecting Eskimo latrines on Point Barrow?"

Just-Plain-Bob ignored him. "How bad is it, Cherokee?"

"Not as bad as it looks, JP, but bad enough," Cherokee replied slowly. "I've been watching the tape. I think the spacecraft is basically intact. She was supposed to pitch into retro position as soon as the motor lit, but when the engine started burning through the side it nulled that maneuver and yawed the spacecraft around before it blew up. Looks like that jury-rigged pile of junk they flew was built with high-quality bubblegum; I didn't see too many pieces fly off when the motor detonated. Lost the doppler radar, and the grappling arm. I think the astronaut's okay."

"You figure the same I do?"

"Depends on what you figure, buddy boy," said Cherokee Bill. "If you're thinking that coming out of shadow the rocket engine was a bit colder than operating specs to start with, and that the spill-over from the laser heated it unevenly, and that the acoustic shocks from the pulses probably popped a casing weld, then, yeah, I'd say you figure about the same I do."

"Yeah, something like that. Got the tracking data?"

"Haven't run them through a computer yet, but by sheer eye-ball, I think we got lucky. Best guess, looks like the new orbit is above the radiation belts."

"Son of a fox. So we claim success and retreat in victory."

"Hey, guys, here comes the news," said Poot-Face. "Let's see what they say."

"You know," said Cherokee, "when I think about it, that was a really dumb thing they did."

"What? Letting us zap her?"

"No, no. Sending her up to geosynchronous orbit in the first place."

"Huh?" said Just-Plain-Bob. "You saying that there are places that people just aren't meant to explore, kid? People are gonna go there someday. Why not now?"

"Yeah, well, sending up somebody in a slapped-together tin can," said Cherokee Bill. "I mean, sure, if we want to send people to geosynchronous orbit someday, okay, but why not think about it, do it right the first time? I mean, it's stupid to rush something together."

"Nah," said Just-Plain-Bob. "You know, I think that's the whole trouble with the space program, caution and planning and preparing everything nine ways from Sunday. How can you ever learn anything if you've got it all set in epoxy from the start?"

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"But look at how they screwed up."

"Hey," said Just-Plain-Bob. He raised his hands. "How else would we get to try out our laser? You gonna watch this news briefing, or not?"

The "news" was a private technical briefing. They weren't allowed to ask questions, but since they had a finger in the problem, the authorities had reluctantly sent a video feed down the hole. Cherokee Bill's analysis had been mostly accurate; the ESA astronaut was out of immediate radiation danger. The difficulty was, the explosion had knocked out her fuel cells, the primary power source for the spacecraft. The battery back-ups in the capsule weren't going to last very long, and when they went, not just the radio, but the auxiliary systems like the air circulation fans would go as well.

"So, why don't we go back to the original plan," said Cherokee Bill. "Use laser ablation, and bring her down?"

"You crazy?" said Honker. "Think they'd let us even touch the zapper after what we just did?"

"Nice idea, for an amateur," said Just-Plain-Bob, "but it won't work. I did the calculations a while back. We can't get enough thrust from vaporizing parts of the spacecraft. And the time when it's in view of the laser is too short. It would take weeks to bring her down, and we'd have to spiral her through the radiation belts."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Look . . . " Just-Plain-Bob grabbed an old operations-manual update and flipped it over to draw on. Cherokee Bill bent over with him, and in a few minutes they were arguing away. It took most of an hour before Cherokee Bill admitted defeat.

Meanwhile, the ESA trouble-team had managed to damp the spin and get the solar array on the spacecraft pointed at the sun. This forestalled the immediate problem, but didn't solve it. The orbit crossed the Earth's shadow. It could do this . . . once. But once would drain the primary batteries. The second time in shadow would be the last.

"Hey, I read a science fiction story like that once," said Cherokee Bill. "There was this astronaut stranded on the moon, see, and—"

"Hey," Just-Plain-Bob interrupted. "This isn't science fiction, Cherokee."

"Yeah, but—"

"Look, was there anything in that story that would help here?"

Cherokee Bill thought for a few moments. "No."

"So put a lid on it. Now, how are we going to save her?"

"Hey, that's not our job," Honker objected. "Let's keep our fingers out of this and hope they don't remember us."

"Look, are we the white knights here, or what? We got her into this; we're the boys with all the neat toys; I say we save her."

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"Yeah?" asked Cherokee Bill. "How?"

Just-Plain-Bob smiled. "I'm glad you asked that question. What's her problem?"

"Can't get down."

"I mean, what's her *immediate* problem?"

Cherokee Bill thought for a moment, and then he grinned. "Son of a gun. Got it. Her problem is that solar cells don't work in the dark. So what you're saying is—"

"Right. She needs a little light. So, we got all the photons she can use. Let's send her some."

Honker was guarding the phone this time as if his life depended on it. Poot-Face and Just-Plain-Bob both had to pull him away and sit on him before Cherokee Bill could take it and explain what they wanted to try.

Cherokee Bill slammed down the phone in disgust. "No way, boys. And that's a direct quote. 'You've caused enough problems, we don't want any more of your hare-brained ideas.' And so on."

"Told you so," said Honker.

"Shut up, Honker," said Just-Plain-Bob. "So, are we gonna let that stop us?"

"What do you mean?"

Just-Plain-Bob picked up the fax. "Says here we have authorization to fire. Did you hear anybody rescind that?"

"Well . . . heck, no. They just said they didn't want to hear any more of our ideas. They didn't tell us not to fire."

"See? And, remember—we fire in the infrared. How are they going to know? They won't see it. All they know is, the solar cells will keep putting out power. Bet we'll confuse the heck out of them."

Poot-Face grinned. "I like it. I like it a lot."

"But do solar cells respond to infrared?" Cherokee Bill asked.

"Silicon solar cells?" said Just-Plain-Bob. "I looked it up. They're good out to nine hundred, maybe a thousand nanometers. There's an atmospheric window we can use at eight-fifty; shouldn't be a problem."

"You can't do that," said Honker. "We're in deep enough trouble now. You know what they'll do if you violate a direct order?"

"I didn't hear any direct orders," said Poot-Face.

"Gotta make sure we don't melt her," said Just-Plain-Bob. "This will take a delicate hand—not too much, not too little."

"Hey, I'll be gentle," said Poot-Face. "I've got the magic touch. How long is it before she goes into shadow?"

In a week it was over, and in a month all the excitement had died down except that CNN was wasting the entire afternoon showing the

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parades and speeches for the returned astronaut. Poot-Face turned off the sound, but left the picture.

"We all shoulda gotten medals for this, guys," Cherokee Bill complained. "One no-trump. You know, the president of France ought to have come over here special, just so he could kiss our feet."

"Belgium," said Just-Plain-Bob.

They had only had to illuminate the stranded astronaut during eclipse for three days; after that the movement of the Earth around the sun had moved the shadow out of the zone where it passed across the orbit. A week later, a rescue mission brought the stranded astronaut down. There had been no mention of the laser station in the news.

They'd passed the word upstairs that they'd be happy to try blasting the Sarca-sat with the zapper, to try to shake loose the errant brace, but they got a reply in no uncertain terms that the zapper was to be powered down and to stay powered down, until and unless they got notification of a full-scale nuclear attack. Just as well, Just-Plain-Bob figured. He didn't think they could focus the zapper to a fine enough spot to take out just the brace anyway.

"Pass," said Honker. "Hey, we're just lucky we didn't get sent to Siberia for blowing her up."

"They figured it was worse to leave us here," said Poot-Face. "At least they get real sunshine in Siberia."

"Couldn't be colder than Chicago," said Cherokee Bill. "Take it from me; I live there."

"Chicago!" said Poot-Face. "Jeez, how can you live *there?*"

"It's not so bad, except for shoveling the snow," said Cherokee Bill. "You know what I'd like to do? Next snowstorm, I'd like to take our laser, bounce it down off the relay mirror, and just *melt* the snow off my driveway. Shouldn't be too hard. Think anybody would notice if I did? JP, you playing cards, or you just gonna sit there all day?"

Just-Plain-Bob took another look at his hand. He could tell when Cherokee was overbidding: his lips moved. But he was looking at more diamonds than the queen of England, and half of them were staring right back at him. "Four no-trump," he said.

What was life, if you didn't take some risks? ●

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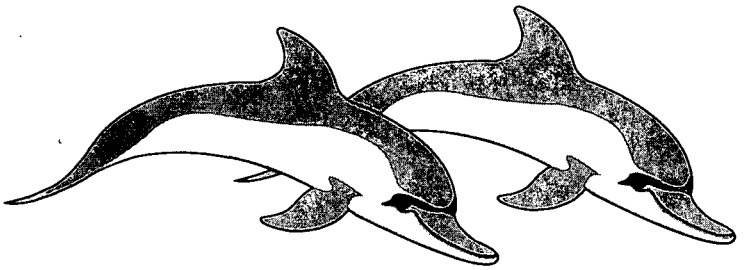
Terry Bisson

THE MESSAGE

While communicating with our own kind isn't always easy, communication between species will be undoubtedly be stranger still . . .



The voice on the phone was distinct if faint: "Our call came through."

"I'll be right there."

Although I had wanted this for years, had anticipated it, had worked for it and dreamed of it even when working for other things, it was still hard to believe. And harder still to explain to Janet.

"That was Beth on the phone," I said.

"And you're leaving." It was a statement, not a question.

"We both knew this might happen."

"Don't bother coming back."

"Janet. . . "

But she had already rolled over and was pretending to be asleep. I could almost hear the fabric ripping: the seam of an eight-year marriage that had held us together from small colleges in the Midwest to oceanic exploration centers, to the long winters at Woods Hole.

Once it started to tear, it tore straight and true. I took a cab to the airport.

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The flight to San Diego was interminable. As soon as I got off the plane I called Doug at Flying Fish.

"Remember when you said you would drop everything to take me to the island if what we were trying to do came through?"

"I'll meet you at the hangar," he said.

Doug's ancient Cessna was already warming up when I got there. I carried two coffees, the black one for him. We were in the air and heading west over Point Loma before we spoke.

"So the fish finally got through," he said.

"Dolphins aren't fish and you know it," I said.

"I wasn't talking about them; I was talking about Leonard. He spends so much time underwater he ought to grow gills."

Doug flew out to the island twice a month to deliver supplies to my partners. As the mainland diminished to a smudge behind us, I thought of the years of research that had brought us to this remote Pacific outpost.

Our funding had been cut off by the Navy when we had refused to allow them to use our data for weapons research. It had been cut off by Stanford when we had refused to publish our preliminary results. Grant after grant had fallen away like leaves; like my marriage, which I now could see was only another leaf hitting the ground. Janet and I had been going in different directions for several years, ever since I had turned down tenure in order to continue my life's work.

The Project.

"There it is, Doc."

The island had been loaned to us by Alejandro Martinez, the nitrate millionaire who was even now on his deathbed in Mexico City. It was a mile-long teardrop of rock, inhabited at one end by seals and at the other by the gray (dolphin-colored, I realized for the first time) fiberglass modulars of the Project.

Doug brought the little 172 straight in to the short strip bulldozed out of the side of a hill. I wondered how he managed in a fog or a wind. There were only about ten feet left at the end when he snubbed the brakes hard to keep the prop out of the rocks.

Beth was waiting in the jeep with the engine running. Seeing the radiant smile on her broad, plain face, I wondered what my life would have been like if I had married not for beauty but for harmony. She and Leonard were partners before anything else.

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"Welcome!" she shouted over the wind and crashing surf. "Want to join us, Doug? This is our big day!"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," he said, shutting down the engine. "Where's the fish?"

"Down in the pool, I imagine," Beth said. "Comes and goes. What kind of intelligent creature would communicate with us if we kept it confined?"

"He's pulling your leg," I told her. "He's talking about Leonard."

"So am I," she laughed.

Expertly, terrifyingly ("This *is* Mexico, after all!"), Beth raced down the island's only half mile of road to the lab, which was built out over the rocks. It looked like a gray and pink coral shelf left behind by the tide. The pool it enclosed was open on three sides to the sea.

Leonard was on the sheltered upper deck, dripping in the wet suit he always wore, munching a seaweed sandwich and staring at a computer screen.

"It came?" I asked.

"It came," he said, looking up at me, his face shining with either sea water or tears.

We embraced, and Beth joined us both. It was a shared triumph. Leonard and I had started the Project twelve years before. He had done the undersea field work, she had designed and built the voice synthesizer, and I had written the program.

While I got into my wet suit, Beth explained to a puzzled Doug what we had done. It had all been top secret until now. "The previous attempts to communicate with dolphins always failed because of the time factor," she said. "It was Doc who figured out that they think not as individuals but collectively. The first problem was to convince them that we, a race that lives and dies as individuals, is even capable of thought, much less communication. Their feeling was, I think, that all our activity was reactive behavior."

"What about cities? Ships?" said Doug. "We've been active on the sea for centuries."

"Oh, they know that. But they have seen coral reefs and seashells, all built objects. The Australian Barrier Reef, for example, is a made object, and it's vaster than all our cities put together. They don't make things. They don't put value in things."

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"The work of their civilization is thought," put in Leonard. "They are building a thought, a concept that they have been working out over the millennia. It's a grand project beyond anything we could imagine."

"So they think they're too good to talk to us," said Doug.

"Don't get your fur up," said Beth, laughing. "They don't think in words, like we do. Words are an extension of the hand—a grasping mechanism, and they don't grasp and manipulate ideas in the way we do. So what we've been working to do over the years is to try and break their concepts down into words."

I was almost ready. I had another gulp of coffee. My hand was shaking.

"The main problem was the time frame," Leonard said. "We talk in bites. Their conversations run in long, centuries-old strings. They are not interested in communicating individual to individual. They communicate with their own developing selves and their descendants. Ready?"

This last was to me. I nodded.

Leonard led me down the stairs to the pool level. Beth and Doug followed. The surf outside was booming like a great heart.

"It still sounds like what you're saying is that they don't want to talk to us," Doug protested.

"Oh, they do, as it turns out," Leonard said. "They were very glad to hear from us. You see, they know who we are."

"They remember," said Beth.

"They have a message for us," said Leonard.

"It took thirty-one months for them to say it," said Beth. "It was the work of thousands of individuals."

"So let's have it!" said Doug. We all laughed at his impatience, so typically human.

"Doc first," said Leonard. "The synthesizer only works under the water." He led me to the end of the pool, where several dolphins, dignified and pearl-gray, waited like envoys in the reception room of an embassy.

I slipped into the water. It was cold but it felt good. The dolphins nuzzled at me, then dove. I felt like diving with them, but I had only my wet suit and no breathing gear.

"Ready?" Leonard asked.

I nodded.

"Put your head under, and listen."

I floated. A deep, slow voice echoed through my bones, like the voice I remembered from a long-ago dream:

"Come home. All is forgiven." ●

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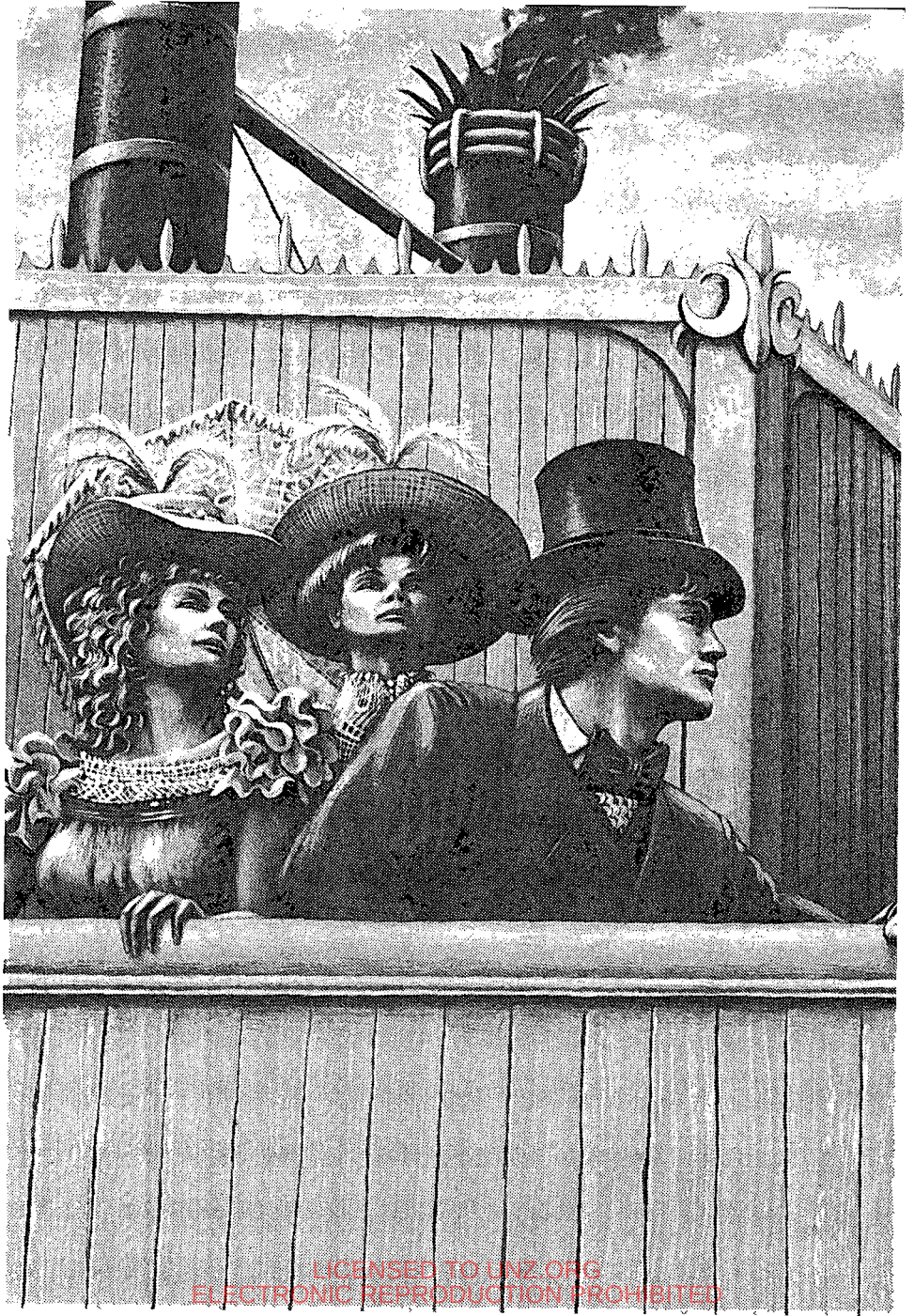

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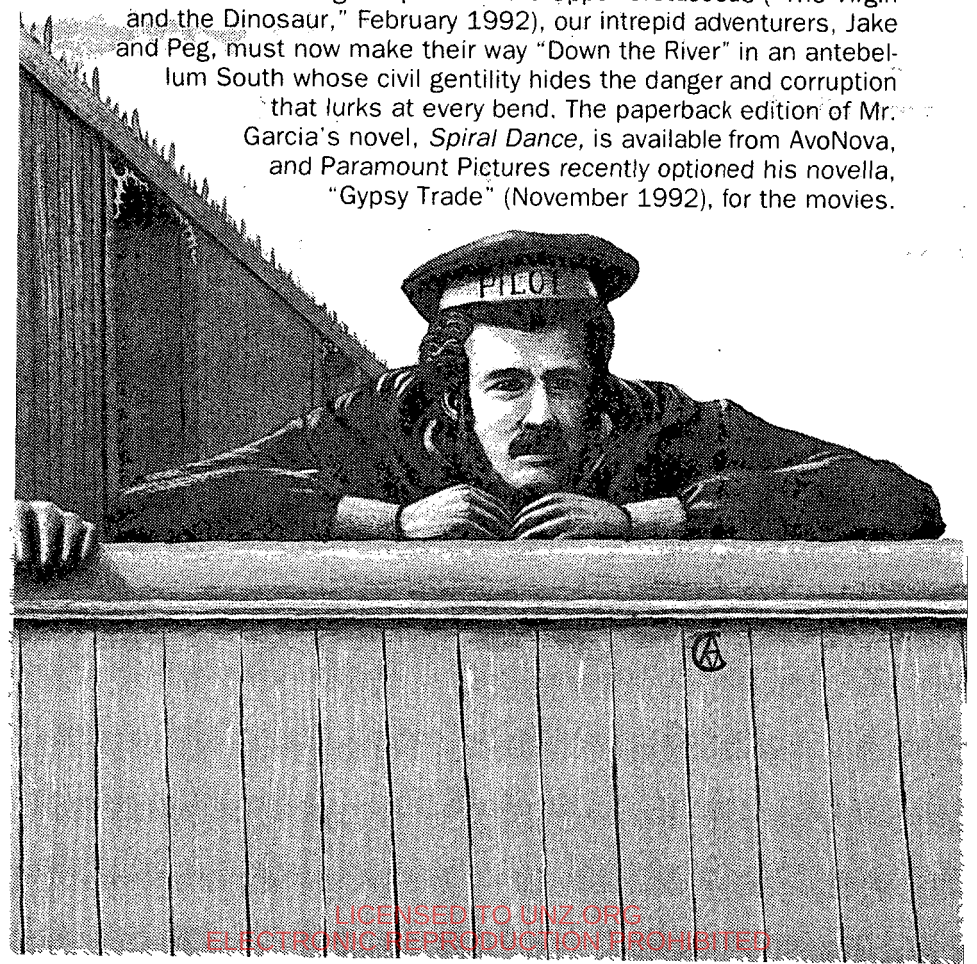
R. Garcia y Robertson

DOWN THE RIVER

art: Alan M. Clark

Last seen surviving the perils of the Upper Cretaceous ("The Virgin and the Dinosaur," February 1992), our intrepid adventurers, Jake and Peg, must now make their way "Down the River" in an antebellum South whose civil gentility hides the danger and corruption that lurks at every bend. The paperback edition of Mr. Garcia's novel, *Spiral Dance,* is available from AvoNova, and Paramount Pictures recently optioned his novella, "Gypsy Trade" (November 1992), for the movies.



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A simmering hot day on the River. Saint Louis, summer of 1857. A mile-long line of steamboats lay moored along the muddy levee, bows angled upriver, gleaming white gingerbread making them look like a flotilla of tall wedding cakes. Mississippi riverwater boiled past the line of prows—"Too thick to drink and too thin to plow."

Jake had turned up the magnification on his corneal lenses to read the names on the pilot houses. Handpainted lettering danced in the heat: *Altona, Polar Star, A.T. Lacey, Natchez, Northerner, Sunny South, Great Republic, Aleck Scott . . .*

"Have we picked one yet?" Peg asked, standing to one side, eyeing the throng pouring along plank sidewalks—flatboatmen, stevedores, sporting ladies, Mississippi desperados, and the like. Everyone who made a living off the river. She and Jake were doing their damnedest to look native. He wore fringed leather breeches and a buckskin jacket. Peg wore a Lakota woman's doeskin dress trimmed with hair and beadwork—its shoulder yoke and half-sleeves were a blaze of white quilling and blood-red crosses. Tall, athletic, and red-haired, Peg had the dangerous habit of looking men straight in the eye. And a white woman wearing tanned leather and scalp locks drew looks. Even in St. Louis. Also catcalls, obscene offers, and proposals of marriage. All of which Peg acknowledged with an open smile—not knowing any English.

"Found our connection," Jake told her in clipped Universal, taking Peg by the elbow, steering her through the raucous babble. Street cars clanged, dropping off passengers. Horse drays and baggage vans jostled past leather-stockinged trappers, European travelers, silk-hatted sharpies, and coffles of slaves. Microamps in Jake's middle ear played Stephen Foster, "*Ho! for Louisiana! I'm bound to leave this town . . .*"

Leave it he would. Jake had been hunting for a steamboat. Not just any steamboat—he didn't need a set of bad boilers steered by a lightning pilot full of forty-rod whiskey, some drunken daredevil who'd tie down the safety-valve, swearing to see his passengers in "Hell or Memphis." Cutthroat competition and superheated steam made riverboats prone to detonation. This was 1857. Scientific metallurgy and federal safety inspectors were as far off as flying machines. Normally, the compweb stretched under Jake's scalp could have called up the names and dates of all major steamboat accidents, explosions, and misadventures. Not this trip, however. He had not expected to be steamboating through nineteenth century North America.

But the moment Jake saw the name *Aleck Scott*, a line popped up in his augmented memory. ("*Who is I? Who is I? . . . I fires de middle door on de* Aleck Scott.") He was sure the *Scott* would get them to New Orleans safely, and in some style.

Pickpockets worked the wharf. Sporting ladies smiled at Jake. His microamps picked up French, Spanish, German, a pair of African tongues, and a dozen English dialects. Black boat workers, both slave

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and free, engaged in a lively crap shoot. Shrieks of "YO-LEVEN" mixed with curses and appeals to heaven in Yoruba and Mandingo. "The man's point is eight—eight's the point. Double-four. Half dollar on de hard way . . ." A few feet down the dock, two industrious sharpies were fleecing a drunken young "Awlins" planter at three card monte—much to the disgust of a white-gloved mademoiselle, twirling her peach parasol and tugging at his arm. She rolled large almond eyes and muttered *"Merde."*

Jake planted Peg next to Mademoiselle Parasol and the monte game. Roustabouts rolled barrels up the *Scott's* gangway, under the eye of a club-wielding mate. Deck passengers lugged aboard bed ticking, blanket rolls, carpet bags, and barking dogs. Somehow, he and Peg had to join them. Peg was a paleontologist. Jake was a senior field agent for the Faster-Than-Light agency. They were headed home from Upper Cretaceous Montana, having completed a dazzling *first run* to the Uppermost Mesozoic. Slung over Jake's shoulder was a beaded Lakota possible sack crammed with data: 3V recordings, DNA scans, freeze-dried chromosomes, humanity's first peek at the age of dinosaurs. This trove was meant to go straight to a civilized period—Antebellum North America was an unexpected detour. Their transport and communications gear had gone down in a prehistoric hurricane; a truly spectacular crack-up amid giant sequoias on the slopes of the proto-Rockies, with puzzled sauropods looking on. Now they were hoofing it home, trying to reach the nearest faster-than-light connection to a civilized era; the Middle-Atlantic portal off the coast of Florida. For that, they had to get to New Orleans as fast as antique transportation allowed. Eighteen-fifties North America was no place to linger in. And Jake had precious little to work with—nothing but his bioimplants, compweb, two medikits, a single neural stunner, and the contents of a metal safebox he had dug up on the way to Independence.

He bent down, opening the safebox, shoving aside a hardbound copy of *Life on the Mississippi,* a pack of Steamboat #00 playing cards, two pairs of dice, and other such River essentials. The bottom of the box was lined with money—counterfeit copies as good or better than the originals. Most of the bills were dated after 1860, utterly useless at the moment. Jake dug past the Civil War greenbacks and Confederate currency, to get at his slim stock of Antebellum bank notes. The safebox was "clean," left behind by a survey crew, containing no out-of-period paraphernalia, nothing to alarm a post-nineteenth century investigator. Someone in 1857 might find the contents damned odd, even spooky (a Mississippi senator named Jefferson Davis and a VMI professor of Natural Philosophy and Artillery Tactics—soon to be known as "Stonewall" Jackson—had their faces on the currency of a non-existent country), but by the time people were equipped to properly examine and date the box, it would be merely a bunch of old bills and curios.

Lying at the very bottom was a thin sheaf of fifties, claiming to be issued by the Kansas Valley Bank in Atchison. Tightfisted William Waddell, bank president and freight baron, frowned up at Jake. Perfect

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steamboat fare. He grabbed the bills, locked the box, and pocketed the key.

Straightening up, Jake realized that Peg was talking to someone.

Damn. Peg was wonderful. The woman he loved, and a whiz with dinosaurs—or anything that had been dead for eons. But she had no practical training in sliding easily through an inhabited era. Lack of English ought to have been enough—but Jake could hear her chattering away in French with Mademoiselle Parasol. It might as well have been Hindi, as far as Jake was concerned. He hadn't programmed for French this trip—there had been hardly any use for Romance languages in the Upper Cretaceous.

Peg took him by the arm, switching to agitated Universal—"Charlotte tells me her brother is being cheated!" In the short time it had taken Jake to find the bank notes, Mademoiselle Parasol had acquired a name and totally won Peg over. Peg nodded toward Mademoiselle's brother at the monte table, saying, "These men mean to rob him." Jake did not doubt it. Charlotte's brother was an earnest young mark in a taffeta coat, baby-faced and tolerably drunk—reeking of money and bourbon—about to fall prey to two river sharks who made their living off well-heeled innocents. Jake tried to indicate that it was hardly their affair.

Peg insisted, her determined face framed by copper curls. Totally untrained in travel through historical periods, she could not see wrong being done without wanting it set right. Mademoiselle pleaded too, first in a flood of French, then, seeing that Jake did not *parlez vous*, she switched to soft southern-accented English. "Won't you help us, suh? It's not his money—it's Daddy's, from a land deal; a sum in trust. All the cash we have till the cotton comes in."

Mademoiselle Charlotte was the perfect damsel in distress, with proud full lips and flashing eyes, her high collar and rose cameo hiding what had to be a graceful neck. Hair like dark honey stuck to her wet forehead, pressed against skin as delicately colored as a fawn's. One look and Jake saw it all, the tragedy not just of Charlotte's half-foxed brother, but of the whole moonlight and honey-suckle south—"Ladies full of false pedigree, the pistol-hearted horsemen and the honeyed-mouth." It was not Jake's fight, not by half—he hardly relished risking everything to rescue some Louisiana bumpkin in a silk suit. But Peg wouldn't back away, so neither could he.

Sighing, he set down the precious possible sack, prepared to act. The monte game was pitched in the lee of a woodcutter's cart. The bearded cord-wood peddler, wearing a battered black hat and shabby coat, stood eyeing the $2,000 in bills sitting on the table—looking like he could have put the money to use, as did half the hard-cases in the crowd. Money like that, lying in open sight on the Saint Louis levee, invited violence. The dealer and shill were well-dressed ruffians with wiry sideburns and hard-edged Arkansas accents, a cold pair of card assassins who could have been scalphunters in their spare time. The dealer accompanied his shuffle with

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a fast patter, full of *bonhomie* and bullshit. "Keep yer eye on the Queen. The Queen of Love. She's yer card."

Charlotte plucked at her brother's sleeve, pleading for him to board the steamer. Half-turning, he shushed her in an overloud whisper—"Hush up. 'Tis ah sure thing." She shrugged off the alcoholic assurance, looking to Peg in despair.

Three-Card monte was a knock on the old shell game. Three face-down cards, shuffled in plain sight. The mark bet he could keep track of one card, in this case the Queen of Hearts. "The Lucky Lady in Red . . ." Jake guessed that the shill had already run off a tempting set of easy wins, taking the young planter into his "confidence," getting the boy to bet big. By St. Louis standards, this was all good, clever fun—a fool's game, crooked as a corkscrew—but if you couldn't hang onto your money, popular opinion held that it was safer in other hands. And these two Arkansas bushwhackers aimed to back their scam with steel. Internal magnetic detectors warned Jake that they both carried suspicious amounts of ferrous metal. The dealer wore a hold out, and what looked to be a hideaway gun. The shill was good for a Bowie knife.

Shuffling stopped. The young man in sweat-stained taffeta deliberated, swaying over the monte table. As he reached for a card, Jake stepped up, saying softly, "Your card is not there."

"What, suh?" Charlotte's brother cocked a bleary eye, seeing Jake for the first time.

Smiling, Jake reached past and rapped the table. "Your Queen is not there."

"Well, where in damnation *is* she, suh?"

Jake gave a friendly nod toward the dealer. "That gent has the Queen in his hold out."

The confidence man gave Jake a go-to-hell look, signaling to the shill with his eyes and taking a hasty step back. He bumped into the wood cart, finding his escape blocked by the wood peddler, a stocky solid-looking brute who would not be easily moved. The crowd edged closer.

"What in blue heaven is a hold out?" demanded Charlotte's drunken brother.

"This is a hold out." Still smiling, Jake reached inside his buckskin jacket, triggering his shoulder holster. The holster shoved his small flat neural stunner into his palm. Lunging across the table, he grabbed the startled dealer's right elbow; spinning the struggling man about, Jake brought the stunner down with a chopping motion, pretended to hit him. The stunner hummed, and the dealer collapsed. Jake slid back the man's sleeve. The Queen of Hearts peeped out from under the unconscious dealer's cuff, held in place by a metal spring.

Cursing, the young planter scooped up his cash, flipping over the cards on the table—three treys.

Jake expected the shill to fade, vanishing into the throng. Instead, the fellow proved alarmingly game, mouthing a blistering oath and shoving aside the drunken planter. A shining steel blade slid out of the shill's

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sleeve, and Charlotte's brother gave a yelp you could have heard in Texas. The monte shark aimed a ripping cut at Jake's gut, screaming, "Yew meddling buckskinned bastard!" Jake swung the slumped dealer around as a shield, angling for a shot with his stunner.

Peg moved faster than both men. As the shill plunged roaring past, she calmly stepped into him, pivoting sideways, right hand falling naturally along his knife arm, locking it against her hip. Without applying undue pressure, she took a short half-step. The man's own momentum sent him sprawling face forward into a stagnant puddle. Peg dropped to one knee, half-atop the startled shill, ready to break his arm if he persisted in struggling. *Ikkyo.* Jake recognized the *irimi* variation of Immobilization #1. Simple, nearly unstoppable.

A third Arkansas ruffian had been sunning himself against the wood-cart, looking mean but harmless. Suddenly he burst into action, jerking a belly gun from his waistband, a small cut-down cap-and-ball revolver. Too late Jake realized that there were *three* members to the monte team. This was the back up man—waving his sawed-off Navy Colt level with Peg's head. Jake dropped the dealer, lifting his hands in surrender but holding tight to the stunner—his compweb figuring odds and angles, cutting time into slow mode. Corneal lenses locked on the gunman's sweaty trigger finger. Peg knelt atop the shill, directly in the line of fire, milliseconds away from having the back of her head blown off. Jake had maybe a quarter second to work in, not half enough time for a proper shot.

The bearded wood-cutter had been leaning lethargically against his cart—lynx eyes following the action, fingers curled around a short cord-wood log. In a blur of motion, he brought the thick chunk of cord-wood cracking down across the back up man's wrist. His suddenness took even Jake's compweb by surprise. The cut-down Navy Colt went spinning. Howling, the gunman grabbed his wrist and hopped about.

Jake finished the job with his stunner. Two short low hums, and the hysteria subsided. The complaining gunman keeled over. A foot-long Bowie knife slipped from the shill's nerveless fingers. Peg rolled the shill upright to keep him from drowning in the mud.

The swift spasm of violence produced stunned silence along the wharf. The action had all happened in half a minute. People stared at the three sleeping swindlers and the upturned treys. Then the dockside babble resumed. "Pay the line. Pay the line," shouted someone at the crap shoot. "Four-bits—Man made his point." Previous losers bent down and slit the sleeping monte dealer's pockets, retrieving their loses, passing out personal effects—a silver watch, silk hankies, and a small pepperbox pistol. Shaking with relief, Jake bent over and picked up the shill's Arkansas tooth-pick—"The Fifth Ace" was burned into the Bowie's handle. Despite all the concealed steel, the monte game had been settled by an aikido hold, a piece of cord-wood, and a plastic stunner. Three out, no shots, no deaths, and the Arkansas side retired.

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Charlotte's brother had his own derringer out, a .45 calibre cap-and-ball original. He was waving the mini-cannon, wild to shoot someone now that the fight was over. Jake could see Peg preparing to disarm him, so he stepped over and offered his hand, trying to save the young ass from still more trouble.

Seeing the proffered hand, the drunken planter managed to pocket his pistol—still capped, cocked, and like to go off—while he pumped Jake's arm like a well handle. "*Mon Dieu,* that was wonderful! I've hardly seen the like."

Semi-numb from seeing that Colt pointed at Peg's head, Jake fought manfully to disengage, insisting no thanks were needed.

"Nonsense, suh! Nonsense!" The planter hauled out a flask of whiskey, offering it to Jake and the wood-peddler, determined to be sociable. The stocky peddler took the flask, staring thoughtfully at the cord-wood in his hand. "Never seen a fellow fall so fast from a rap on the wrist—must be something in the wood." His level gaze shifted to Jake, "Unless you would like to explain, stranger?" The unblinking inspection would have done credit to a Pinkerton.

Jake shrugged. This bearded round-shouldered fellow in a shabby coat was plainly no one's fool. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and the quick way he reacted meant that he must have seen action—maybe out West, or in the Mexican War. He hadn't seen the stunner hidden in Jake's hand, but he knew that something was amiss; clearly, the wood-cutter was one of those alert, wide-awake gents who could organize an expedition, command an army, or build a railroad—but who happened to be carting wood and drinking whiskey. America was alive with back-woods geniuses fueled by moonshine. Rail-splitters who could run for president. They were what made the place so exciting—and so damned dangerous.

Taking a slow thoughtful swig, the peddler thanked the young planter and handed back the flask, then produced a bundle of Missouri stogies out of his battered coat, offering them around as though he had delivered a baby rather than broken a man's wrist. "Some smooth sippin' whiskey. Straight scotch—Glenlivet, I would guess?"

"Yes indeed," Charlotte's brother beamed, taking a cigar. "Armand Marie d'Anton, at yer service." He somehow managed a deep bow without tipping over. "An' this is my sister, Charlotte Marie."

Charlotte smiled and did a deft curtsey, saying, "The Maries are for our mother. An' just plain Danton was never good enough for Daddy. May we have the honor of knowin' who came so convincingly to our aid?"

The woodcutter lifted his black slouch hat. "Ulysses Simpson Grant at your service—but you, madame, may call me Sam." Of course. Jake admonished his compweb for not seeing that coming—the shabby clothes, the familiar deepset gaze, the quick resolute action, and the thorough knowledge of whiskey—the man was Sam Grant to a T. His manner reminded Jake of Sitting Bull at a buffalo feed, passing out tobacco and playing the bluff shy ladies' man.

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"An' what is *yer* name, friend?" Armand shoved the flask of scotch at Jake—drunkenly insisting that everyone introduce themselves and share the good feeling.

Jake groped for a name. It would do no good to have "Jake Bento" attached to these events; he did not aim to get "known" on the River. Or to have these three cutthroats coming after him once they revived. "Rhett," he replied. "Rhett Butler. And this is Miss Scarlett O'Hara." He patted Peg's arm.

"But I heard her tell my sister to call her Peggy?"

Damn the French—he never knew what Peg was saying. "Scarlett's a nickname."

"Ah, I see, suh. With her red hair. A real fighter, too." Armand shook his head over the shill, who was lying face up in the mud puddle, mouth open, snoring like a shanghaied sailor. "Never seen an armed ruffian upended with such despatch. What did she *do* to the fella?"

"*Aikido.*"

"Ya don't say? She made it look so easy. Are you planning to board the *Scott?*"

Jake admitted as much.

"Deck passage?"

He nodded. Doubtless that was all that could be had, so close to departure. The boat was bound to be bulging at the gunwales, crowded with paying passengers and slaves headed south.

"Then you must share our staterooms, suh. We have a pair, booked all the way through to Awlins."

Jake gave in. Short of taking another steamboat, there was no way of shedding this pair. Peg and Charlotte had their heads together, chatting to each other in French, alike as two peas, pretty and headstrong, happy to be going somewhere with someone new and interesting.

He could have kicked Peg's doeskinned fanny. Instead, he had to smile his thanks.

Grant nodded toward the three sleeping monte sharks, lying at odd angles in the mud with their pockets slit. "If you wish to call a constable, I would be pleased to stand witness."

Armand shrugged, "Saint Louis can keep 'em, with my blessin', suh—I aim to board the *Scott.*"

Sam Grant gripped his woodcart and pushed off through the crowd, clearly happy to have some good whiskey and a bit of action under his belt. In four years, this grizzled ex-soldier in a moth-eaten coat would be the main field commander in the Department of Missouri. In twelve, he would be President of the United States, the first full general since Washington, the most famous living American. Jake had not expected to meet the Savior of the Union pushing a wood-cart along the St. Louis docks, but so far as people went, the American West was still a very small place.

Armand marched the rest of them up the *Aleck Scott's* fantail gangway, lighting Grant's cigar and humming the "Marseilles."

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Aux armes, citoyens!
Formez vos battillons!
Marchons, marchons . . .

Tipsy as a parson on holiday, and twice as happy. Jake had more misgivings. Amid the mud and soot of St. Louis, the big riverboat fairly shone. Jake saw roustabouts with swabs and holystones polishing decks long as a playing field. The *Aleck Scott* was a miracle of Yankee engineering married to Southern comfort—a hotel-palace on a steam raft sporting ornate balustrades and fluted pillars—bigger than Nelson's flagship or Cleopatra's pleasure barge, but able to carry quality folk and common cargo over swamps shallower than the deep end of a swimming pool. Uniformed servants met them at the rail, "Sir'n and Mam'n" like they were royalty coming aboard. No one so much as arched an eyebrow at Armand's drunken stagger, or the scalplocks on Peg's dress. A glass of iced riverwater, topped with a sprig of mint, was thrust into Jake's hand. Letting the grit settle to the bottom, he took a sip. Service like this took some of the savageness out of the American wilderness.

After seeing their gear safely stowed in the staterooms, Jake took a turn on the Texas deck. Whistles screeched. The "last bell" clanged, and pine-resin smoke poured from gold-crowned stacks—"Dem dat ain't goin', please get ashore." Deckhands massed in the forecastle gave a shout, and the band struck up a traveling tune:

"I wish I was in de land of cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten,
Look away, look away . . ."

Gangways went up, and the *Scott* got underway, forging through tiers of flatboats and lumber rafts, the pilot cutting in tight to show the riff-raff who was Queen on the River. In minutes they were booming down the main channel, leaving the levee behind, headed south in grand style, each turn of the huge twin paddlewheels taking them closer to New Orleans and the Middle Atlantic portal. Not a shade too swiftly for Jake, who was eager as hell to bid *bonne chance* to the American wilderness. Saint Louis and its brown pall of woodsmoke disappeared round a green bend, lost behind a screen of scrub pine and cottonwoods.

The Aleck Scott

Standing alone at the Texas rail, Jake watched the river rolling by three stories below. What future mischief Armand and Charlotte managed would just have to be dealt with. First priority was to get Peg and the Cretaceous recordings downriver damned *pronto*. Losing their transport in a crash during a hurricane was *already* a big black mark—the Faster-Than-Light agency would definitely be unamused.

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FTL had a poor sense of humor, and precious little forgiveness. Monumental amounts of time and energy went into maintaining the portals, and a field agent who failed to deliver—*for whatever reason*—was an absolute liability.

The agency enjoyed boasting of its 99 percent success rate—but that counted every time hop, no matter how safe or trivial. The *actual* failure rate on high-risk penetrations of new or chancy periods was one in five. Even that did not sound awfully ferocious, until you multiplied out the probabilities and discovered the odds of completing three such missions were only a shade over 50 percent—the chances of doing an even dozen were less than one in ten. There were a million fatal ways to fuck up. Portal failure. Chronic slips. Unattended details. Too little foresight. Too much imagination. Or just a plain run of bad luck. Jake was already considered far too *colorful* and accident prone. Easily FTL's most raffish agent. Afflicted with more *joie de vivre* than *per regulation*. Only unbroken success had made him a senior field agent, able to pick among plum assignments like steering Peg through the Mesozoic.

But the bigger the assignment, the better the odds of going bust—*for whatever reason*. The recordings Jake carried represented six priceless months in the Upper Cretaceous. (A round trip to even the closest parts of the Mesozoic was the energy equivalent to traveling 130 million light years at near infinite acceleration—hideously expensive.) Lose those recordings, and he might as well jump ship in Memphis and learn to chop cotton, selling his body to the highest bidder. FTL had the means to make a Memphis auction block look *appealing*. He could end up on perpetual call in some godawful corner of the past—like counting rats and corpses during the Black Death. (Froissart said "one third of the world died"—but what did Froissart know? Modern epidemiologists wanted *real* numbers, *exact* details—fatal symptoms, dead ticks, blood counts, and pus samples. *Some* poor sod had to supply them.)

A steamer passed, billowing smoke, pulling a thirty-cord wood flat upriver. Whistles tooted. Sunlight sparkled off muddy water. Accordion music drifted up from roustabouts playing rollicking shanties in the bow:

. . . one more river ta cross.
Old Noah once he built an Ark,
There's one more river ta cross.
He patched it up with hickory bark,
There's one more river ta cross . . .

At that moment, the American wilderness did not seem exceedingly dangerous—stark and untamed maybe, but not actively hostile. He could easily be too worried. Too prepared. They had seen a spot of trouble at the docks and Jake was still recovering from the heavy adrenal rush it had produced. But that was to be expected. St. Louis was a nasty place.

Putting all problems on hold, Jake sauntered down to the boiler deck for rum and recreation before joining Peg in their borrowed stateroom.

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The middle deck of the *Aleck Scott* was one long gilded salon, with Windsor armchairs, deep blue carpets, gaudy chandeliers, and shining spittoons—awash with enough liquor to float the boat. The free flow of alcoholic refreshment in North America seemed to be the *major* improvement since the Mesozoic. No wonder that President Washington's first order of business had been to put down a whiskey rebellion.

The brass-bound mahogany bar was lined with well-upholstered planters in evening suits—though it was not yet noon. Nary an easy coat in the crowd. Jake felt conspicuous in his leather breeches and Sitting Bull buckskins. Talk at the bar was pretty raw. A brute named Forrest with a mean squint and a worse laugh was buying drinks, saying that he had shot a runaway that morning. The man was pure Mississippi Gothic, wearing a long black parson's wedding coat thrown open to show off a pair of holstered Colts, with butts reversed so either pistol could be drawn with either hand—the gunfighter's rig. Forrest assured the bar that a double load of buckshot was "the only scientific cure fer a slave sufferin' from loose feet."

A downriver gent dared to disagree, saying that he came from around Columbia, where there was "way too much shootin' of niggers. Not two weeks ago, a couple of boys kilt a slave on the road, jes' for spite—a valuable nigger, *worth more than $1200.*"

Forrest gave him that narrow look saved for Yankees, abolitionists, and similar insects. "The Lord Almighty decreed slavery for the blackman. If blood be spilt, sobeit. His will be done."

"Nonsense," insisted the soft-hearted fellow from Columbia, "you wouldn't shoot a mule that strayed. Shootin' a man's nigger is got ta be at least as bad as shootin' his mule."

Jake tried to edge away with his rum punch, before anyone wanted his opinion. But two courtly gents in full funeral rig accosted him—the taller of the two, a gladhanding Missourian named Taylor, asked if Jake was indeed "fresh off the prairie." Dressed in a Lakota dance costume, and paying for his drink with a neatly faxed Atchison banknote, it would have been foolhardy for Jake to deny it. Taylor wanted to know if he had been through Nebraska—"Tell us, stranger. We hear the Niobrara is prime cotton country."

Taylor's loud and portly companion, a red-faced cottonmonger named Benson, swore that Nebraska was big enough to make a dozen new slave states, "If it weren't for the rascally Republicans . . ."

Jake had seen nothing on the Niobrara that resembled a cotton plantation, or a Republican—just several thousand rascally Lakotas, Oglalas, Burnt Thighs, Minniconjoux, and Northern Cheyenne. Each and every brave hopping mad over the Ash Hollow massacre and the Army's murder of Old Conquering Bear. He tried to discourage the thought that Young Crazy Horse's people were eager to have Wasichu plow up the buffalo grass and plant cotton. But these two Missourians were convinced that slavery had a terrific future out West, already counting "Bleeding" Kansas as a slave state, talking like the whip and auction block would

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go on forever. Taylor had cashed in his plantation; being so long in cotton had killed the soil—"Couldn't grow a sweet potato in it no more." He was hauling his slaves downriver for sale. " 'Cept for my old mammy—an' one perky yellow handmaid. A pert piece—not yet sixteen an' nearly white."

Benson guffawed, slapping Taylor's back, calling him, "A sly coon."

Taylor gave a wink and a nod, "Why, in the dark, stab me if she ain't *all* white! I aim ta sell the rest in Louisiana, or Texas. Maybe Southern California—if I get so far."

"Slaves is sellin' well now?" ventured Benson.

"Shud say so." Taylor fingered his trim goatee, "What would you figure I got for a woman of thirty an' her two-year-old suckling?"

Benson considered. "It depends. How many children has she had?"

"Four, since I bought her."

"I'd say six-fifty, seven hundred dollars."

"A Texan paid *eight*. Picaninnies alone are good for two hundred the moment they're pupped!"

Mildly sick, Jake excused himself, saying that he had not half-realized times were so flush. He left them congratulating themselves on Buchanan's inauguration, blessing the Democrats, and damning the Republicans, who meant to free the slaves—"Jes' for *spite*. Let *them* get in an' it's war for sure!" It was no news to Jake that this shaky Union was about to bust its seams over slavery—he aimed to be long gone by then. Every period had its own pulse and rhythm, as sharply identifiable as the lines in a spectrometer. Here and now, life on the river throbbed to the slap of paddlewheels, the click of dice, and the beat of minstrel tunes, all accompanied by the snap of the whip. Jake had not made it that way, but FTL expected him to dance to the music.

Turning the porcelain knob on the stateroom, he noted the original oil painting decorating the door—a naval scene done in crude bold colors, the mighty *Constitution* pummeling a puny dismasted *Java*. Peg lounged in the cabin's wicker chair, barely contained in a gown borrowed from Charlotte—a cascade of creamy satin stiffened with crinoline and several sizes too tight, making her look like a leggy red-haired trollop posing as a bride. Jake shook his head, still feeling mulish over the unnecessary roughness at the monte table. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Why not?" Peg assumed a wicked smile. "Don't we *deserve* to?" Since crashing in prehistoric New Mexico, they had *walked* most of the way to Missouri, by way of the Hell Creek FTL portal in Montana—sleeping in trees, caves, Lakota tipis, and Army post barracks. Nothing so far put a notch on the accommodations aboard the *Scott*—lace trim, china chamber pots, smart service.

Jake sat down on the clean bunk, neatly pressed and turned back—but could not get comfortable. "Look," he told her, "you don't realize how chancy it is, dealing with these people." The talk in the saloon had been a too-vivid reminder of what life on the Mississippi was like. If he and Peg came adrift on the Big Muddy, who would blame *her*? She was a

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paleontologist—*he* was the field agent, supposed to *know the territory*. "These people are as savage as Lakotas, they just go to more lengths to *hide* it." Peg had started a royal stir in Sitting Bull's camp; only Hunkpapa courtesy, and Sitting Bull's fondness for "Red Woman," had staved off bloodshed.

"Charlotte is no savage," Peg replied. "And Armand would not be a nuisance if he cut his alcohol allowance." Reaching over, she lifted the rum punch out of Jake's hand, taking a sip.

"Damn it," Jake got up, trying to retrieve his rum, regretting he'd ever taught Peg to drink. "You did see those coffles of slaves being loaded aboard?"

"I saw," she nodded soberly, setting the glass down on the deck, out of his reach, fending him off with her free hand. She had shown this same complacency sashaying into the tyrannosaur-infested scrub at Hell Creek with nothing but her 3V recorder.

He told her all about the jolly talk at the bar. "Right now it is just fighting, flogging, and selling folks for fun and profit. Soon they are going to be killing each other in droves, all up and down this river. Is that savage enough?"

She grinned mischievously, brimming with sass and sin, "I'll show you 'savage.' Take *it* out."

"Take what out?" Jake lunged for the glass. A woman trained in unarmed combat was not always easy to handle. She stopped him with her palm. "You know. This." Gentle unbending pressure against the front of his breeches kept him from getting at his drink.

"Shit." Jake stopped struggling, giving up on the glass. The harder he pushed, the deeper her hand sank into the leather patch at his crotch. Deft fingers were undoing the laces on his leggings. "Look," he warned. "You won't win this argument by seducing me."

"Of course not." Acting very unconcerned, Peg undid the last lace, pulling his leggings down, letting the leather drag over his hips. "Who's arguing?" Using soft palm pressure, she made room for her tongue between the top of his breeches and the base of his groin. "You worry too much," she told him.

Damn. Worrying was *his* job. Peg took her paleontology plenty seriously—back in the Mesozoic, she had not let them rest or fuck until they had found a sauropod. A *big* sauropod. Jake cast a panicky glance over his shoulder. Naturally, he had not latched the stateroom door. At any moment, Armand and Charlotte might burst in with a hearty *bonjour*. Or some overpolite butler would appear with a tray of tarts and ices, in time to catch Peg acting like a *hori* in a ball gown. Leaning as far as he could with his breeches about his hips, he groped for the latch—all the time telling Peg not to stop, saying how much he *really* appreciated what she was doing. Fumbling with excitement, Jake finally got the cabin door locked, just as Peg was dragging him onto the bunk, whispering, "Tell me you care."

"I more than care," he told her, furiously undoing ribbons and lace, as

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he struggled to kick off the leggings. (A Lakota warrior merely whipped aside his breechcloth, but Jake had stupidly turned his leggings into regular pants.) "I'm absolutely crazy about you."

"Not about *me*, silly. I mean Armand and Charlotte. Do you care about them—as people?"

He sighed. "Probably too much." Any consideration for the "locals" went clean against the regulations.

"Good." Beneath the satin and crinoline was the same smooth strong body he had made love to in the Mesozoic. Feeling her flesh against his, he forgot about Armand and Charlotte, about the slaves in the hold and the good ole boys at the bar, about Forrest with his killing ways and gunfighter's rig. He even forgot about the Mesozoic recordings—forgot about everything but the moment. Afterward, he lay atop her, kissing the long curve of her hip, savoring Peg's smell and feel, saving up memories in his compweb for those moments when she really petrified him.

Pleased and drowsy, Peg rolled over, wrapping her legs about his middle, pulling his chest against her groin. "Charlotte hates slavery," she told him. "She said so."

Jake propped himself up on one elbow. He had *expected* to hear something like that. "Oh, I'm sure Charlotte hates slavery. Hates it every day. But she comes from a slaveholding *family*. Her wealth, her station, everything she has, from Daddy's plantation to her frilly peach parasol, it all comes *from* slave labor."

Peg ran a finger along his bare shoulder. "She says at home slaves are like family. Their mother died—their father never remarried. She and Armand were nursed, rocked, and spanked by slaves. Totally raised by them, really."

It was plain that Peg had totally, really fallen for Charlotte. Understandable enough; Jake was also drawn by the shy sober drawl and smart, caring manner—Charlotte had courage and style by the bucket, and tried to do right by a world she had not made. But Jake doubted that courage and style were near enough. He thought about Taylor, relaxing at the bar, swearing that he would never sell his old foster mother, or his pert young concubine. And Thomas Jefferson, writing passionately about man's equality while he thumped his slave mistress—who was his daughter's playmate and his wife's half sister. "Being family makes it *worse*."

By the time Jake left the stateroom, sunset had turned the Father of Waters into a river of fire. Black snags radiated blood-red ripples. Leafy shorelines and long islands faded by stages into blue hills and purple shadow. Darkness crept out of the river, devouring the light. The pilot on duty, a man named Bixby, rang three bells—the signal to land. Jake saw Captain Fitz-Roy stroll out of his drawing room at the forward end of the Texas deck.

"We will lay up here for the night," Bixby called down.

"Very well, suh," replied Fitz-Roy, stiff and proper in his kid gloves and plug-tile hat, a diamond stickpin showing on his shirt front. Captains

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on river steamers were pure ornament—like the gilt deerhorns above the ship's bell. It was the *pilot* who carried the ship in his hands. And Horace Bixby was one of the best, the man who would one day steer Sam Grant's gunboats downriver. (A prime factor in Jake's picking the *Aleck Scott.)* Twelve-hundred uncharted miles of twisting channel lay between St. Louis and the Gulf, without a single bell buoy or lighthouse—if Bixby did not care to run downstream in the dark on a low river, then the whole blazing palace must tie up till morning at some plantation dock. Normally Jake would not have minded. The *Scott* had been a delight—a splendid stateroom, rum punch from a plush bar, making love with Peg—it hardly felt like work. But complications were piling up. Three angry Arkansas monte players were apt to be coming downriver, aiming to wreak vengeance on Rhett Butler. And the compweb that Jake relied on to foretell disaster kept yammering that Armand and Charlotte were like as not to land in more trouble.

Dinner was a full-dress business, rich hearty Southern fare and huge portions—beefsteak, pork chops, hoecakes, sweet yams, Indian corn, stewed chicken, fried potatoes, with all manner of pies for dessert—whatever the passengers did not finish went onto the "grub pile" for the roustabouts to pick over. Service was spotless, white napkins, white tablecloths, white livery; only the faces of the waiters were black. Peg and Charlotte sat on either side of Jake, speaking French across his plate, making him realize how unfair he had been, expecting Peg not to latch on to the one person she could *talk* to. And Charlotte *was* godawful gay and attractive. He felt himself being taken in by her Orleans Belle pose, despite the depths of anger and ambition beneath. As they left the table, she seized his arm, saying in a sweet Southern lilt they should all go for a stroll. Wine had come with dinner. The smell of her perfume, the raw feel of flesh under silk, were frankly overpowering. Just hearing her whisper "Mistah But-lah" in his ear was enough to make him want to walk the length of the Mississippi for her. Under the charm and flirtation, Jake sensed stoic courage calling out to him, saying, "You claim to be a man. You claim fairness and compassion—Well, I need you to be strong."

All she actually whispered was, "Help me keep Armand away from the gambling."

Jake agreed. Once the tables were cleared, the brandy and cards would be out, along with the gamblers who infested the big riverboats. Forrest was already waving a specklebacked deck, inviting Taylor to take another beating at poker. Benson allowed that he too might have some money left to lose. It did not surprise Jake that Forrest was a gambler. The romantic "Gaylord Ravenal" image of the Mississippi gambler, all silk coat and smooth manners, was an invention of later, more innocent times. Most men who made their living by fleecing the traveling public were crude thugs, often posing as upcountry hicks or traveling preachers. The chivalrous dashing gentleman was more likely to be the pigeon

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—young well-to-do plungers like Armand, who would bet wildly, play badly, and end up broke.

Gents pulled up chairs, chuckling over Taylor's losses, and the way he bet one of his slaves—"Havin' a good-lookin' young houseboy stand up ta back a silly little inside straight that he had not a prayer of fillin'."

Taking Armand's arm, Jake suggested a walk down the gangway and along the wharf. The night was warm, lit by the four-story steamer ablaze with lamps and candles. Plantation fields came right to the river, and at low water there was a high dry levee. Peg and Charlotte spoke French. Jake and Armand shared a clay jug. Under the influence of crude corn liquor, Armand confessed his losses. While Jake and Peg had been playing spoon in their stateroom, Armand had been busily losing at poker. The two-thousand Jake had saved from the monte table was gone—"Along with a mite more."

"How much more?"

"Seven thousand."

Nine thousand in one afternoon. Jake pondered how deep the man's pockets might be.

"But I aim ta win it back. . . ."

Armand's breezy confidence raised shivers. Jake's compweb predicted that the young planter was headed for a terrible fall. Sam Grant drank out of boredom, but Armand needed no excuse, and while Grant could be counted on to sober up for a crisis—like the coming Civil War—Armand would barely notice the commotion. He was not a mean drunk, but he was a serene and irresponsible one, able to make the most hideous mistakes and be miserably sorry later. Armand had what the next century would call an "addictive personality," only antebellum Missouri did not offer twelve-step counseling or an outback addicts anonymous. Therapy was still in the "pluck 'em an' plant 'em" stage.

". . . these are decent chaps, who've gladly taken my note in hand."

Christ. Armand's pockets were *already* emptied; which meant no free ride downriver—in fact, Jake could see himself having to cover Armand's losses. Setting his compweb to furiously estimating how he might raise the capital, Jake remembered Jenghiz Khan's heartfelt warning—"Save a man's life and he's yours forever." The jovial old Mongol had assured Jake that for the chronically unlucky the best cure was massacre.

A big brightly lit steamer went blazing by, churning upriver, sparks flying from her funnels, throwing light over dark rippling water. She gave the tied-up *Scott* a whistle blast, while a band played "Swanee River." Steamers ran day and night upriver, even in low water, since the current supplied ample steerageway—only fog stopped a northbound boat. The contrariness of the Mississippi allowed river steamers to make better time running against the current than with it.

"How does it work?" Armand asked. "You speaking English, and Peggy speaking French?" Jake had wondered when Armand would tumble to that. The problem with his imposture was that he and Peg never knew

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what the other was saying. Thank God they were almost to Cairo, maybe three days from New Orleans.

"And this other language, the one you speak between the two of you. May I ask what it is?"

There was no use trying to explain Universal. Jake looked about and lowered his voice—"It's Rumanian."

"Really, suh?"

"Yes," Jake confessed. "Our names are not really Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara."

"I thought as much," Armand whispered back.

"No one is to know," Jake warned. "But we are Rumanian royalty traveling in disguise, seeing the West incognito."

Armand admitted suspecting something of the sort. "I mean, with your strange outfits. And Miss Peg bein' absolutely new to America. What are your real names, if I may be bold?"

"Swear not to tell a soul." Jake kept up the conspiratorial tone, as if frogs on the levee might report the conversation. "Not a word. Not even to Charlotte."

"On my hon-ah, suh."

"I am the Count Dracula. Peg is my Countess."

"I'll be damned," Armand whistled, taking a swig of raw bourbon and staring at Peg's back, where ample skin showed above her borrowed dress—a Transylvanian countess in cast-offs.

"If you ask, Peg is bound to deny it," Jake warned.

"Of course." Armand understood. He tipped back the corn liquor jug, took a long pull.

A cry came from down beneath the levee on the river side, followed by a thud and a whimper. Jake saw Peg turn in the direction of the sound, pause momentarily, then disappear over the lip of the levee, into the darkness along the low bank. He dashed after her, setting his corneal lenses for night vision, turning up his microamps. Shadows leaped into stark contrast. Footfalls sounded like thunder—accompanied by the crack of blows. Someone down by the riverbank was screaming, "Oh, don't, suh!" (Smack.) "Please, dear God—dat's enuff!" (Whack.)

At the edge of the levee, he caught sight of Peg sliding down the embankment. Below them, between the bank and the levee, a girl of thirteen or fourteen was lying full length on the ground—groaning, sobbing, choking. A burly fellow in a rumpled suit and slouch hat, sporting a big handlebar moustache, stood astride her hips. He was laying into her with what looked like a leather crop or dog whip. Jake could not see the girl's face—her arms were flung forward protecting her head—but the man's expression showed neither anger nor excitement. He swung his whip with cool determination, giving no sign of letting up. Jake called down, "Stop."

The man looked up, "Suh?"

"What are you doing?" It was all Jake could think to say.

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"Whut does it *look* lak I'm doin'? I'm beatin' the shit out of this li'l bitch!"

"But why?"

"I got my reasons. An' I'd take it kindly if you did not interrupt." It was clear that the cowering girl was black, most probably a slave—the man beating her was likely to be well within his legal rights; indeed, he might be *enforcing* the law.

Out the corner of his eye, Jake saw Peg reach the bottom of the embankment and scramble to her feet. Charlotte was a few feet to Jake's left, cussing at the fellow with the dog whip, calling him "bastard" and "demon." The man did not seem to care, raising his arm and turning back to his work. Armand was at his sister's side, keeping her from following Peg down the bank. The scariest aspect of slavery was the way brutality, rape, even murder, could be such casual matters in a country busy boasting at being free and democratic. No wonder Missouri bordered on Bleeding Kansas. In Jake's estimation, anyone unmoved by such beatings was just as likely to horsewhip a loved one. Or shoot a stranger over cards. A whole nation, or at least half of one, was gripped in violent schizophrenia, careening toward civil war—making Armand's eerie calm as awful as the blows themselves. The courtly Awlins gentleman showed no sympathy for the child under the lash, merely attempting to restrain his sister.

There was no restraining Peg, though. Once upright, she walked straight over to the man with the whip. Peg was tall for a woman, but the big backwoodsman towered over her, his hand half-raised to strike. Seeing her coming, he relaxed a bit, saying, "Mam, you'll oblige me . . ."

Jake never did hear how the poor brute expected Peg to oblige him. She seized the back of his whip hand, at the same time catching his forearm above the wrist, pressing into the nerves as she stepped forward. Only Jake's corneal lenses and compweb playback allowed him to follow her movement. It was *Yonkyo*. Immobilization no. 4. One of the most painful holds in *Aikido*. The man gasped and went tumbling tail-end up, dropping his whip with an undignified howl, his arm bent at a terrible angle. Peg leaned casually into the fall, putting her body behind her knee, snapping the man's forearm. Then she stepped back into a defensive stance, warily watching him writhe in agony on the ground.

Jake bounded down the slope to be at her side in case the fellow came up with a gun. The beaten girl scampered up, vanishing into the dark along the bank—as if she did not aim to stop this side of Minnesota. Massa groaned, rolled over, tried to rise, and slumped back—utterly astonished at what had happened to his arm. Peg was not even breathing hard, but Jake read cool fury in her eyes. It was the first time he had seen her intentionally hurt anyone—or anything. "I could have done that more discreetly with the stunner," he reminded her.

She glanced over, eyeing him evenly. "It wouldn't have given me half the satisfaction."

He managed to hustle her back to the top of the bank. By then the

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man was sitting up, cursing, cradling his broken arm, promising to set the law on them, swearing that, "Filthy riverboat trash an' their cheap whores got no right assaultin' honest folk! No right at'all!" Blood dripped down his moustache from landing face-first in gravely mud. Charlotte cussed back, calling him a "vile ignorant coward—lower than the dumb-as-dirt hands in Daddy's fields."

Armand tried to hush his sister, saying it was nothing. Jake was not so sure, nodding toward the *Scott*—"The boat will be tied until dawn. What if this man comes back with his buddies, or even the law?"

Armand laughed off Jake's fears. "An' what will he say? That a young lady off the *Aleck Scott* took away his whip, freed his nigger, an' broke his arm? No owner or overseer with a gram of sense or self-respect would admit *that*. Depend on it, by the time he tells his story, he will have been set upon by at least a dozen armed abolitionists, led by old John Brown in the flesh."

Maybe. Hopefully. They left the man sitting on the mudbank, screaming threats and spitting teeth. Jake despaired of ever getting downriver without a stir. Complications kept multiplying at an absolutely furious pace. Peg had cheerfully added criminal assault—and probably slave-stealing—to passing bad banknotes and creating a commotion at dockside. All within a half day of St. Louis.

Hat Island

That night, Jake dreamed of dinosaurs. Heavy Cretaceous foliage bordered the muddy river—ferns, cycads, and bald cypress, reeking of swamp-bog, rotting palmetto, and sweet magnolia. Crocodiles basked on sand bars, and mosquitos as big as hummingbirds buzzed in the hot Mesozoic air, making him imagine that the *Aleck Scott* had somehow made it to Louisiana already. Churning round an illusory bend, he spotted a dead duckbill half-buried in a mudbank, green camouflage skin ripped and shredded, gleaming white bone poking through pink meat—it was a huge *hadrosaurus*, too mauled for Jake to name the species. (Peg could have told him, only she was not in this dream.) A flight of pterosaurs with tremendous pointed wings and garish red-yellow markings wheeled above the carcass, riding the thermal created by the warm dark river mud—*Quetzalcoatlus,* last and largest of the flying reptiles. One circled out over the cooler air off the trees. Its glide faltered. Great wings gave a couple of shallow downstrokes to gain speed and get away from the canopy, beating back into the thermal.

Jake realized that this could hardly be Louisiana, which spent the Mesozoic underwater; more likely it was Wyoming or South Dakota, near the edge of the inland seaway. The dream may have been brought on by eagerness to get to bayou country, but Jake's compweb had kicked in, mixing with his sleeping imagination, filling out the scene with stored memories. He and Peg had staked out this dead hadrosaur, to record

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scavenger behavior and see if the theropod who ambushed the duckbill would come back for a second feeding. Dreams like this—where stored RAM resonated with his unconscious—were a time outside of time, a space outside of space, part of some great primordial dreamtime.

A pack of jackal-sized velociraptors crashed out of the brush, slender loping meateaters, with long necks, whiplike tails, and terrible sickle-clawed forelimbs. *Velociraptor* was quick, cunning, and relatively rare—which was why his compweb had retained the memory—a rapacious social predator, not above dining on carrion. The hunting pack sprang into raucous debate with the pterosaurs. *Quetzalcoatlus* enjoyed the advantage of size and height, swooping down, snapping at the smaller velociraptors, then flapping out of reach. But their opponents had those nasty sabrelike claws, meant for disemboweling big game. Kilo for kilo, *Velociraptor* was the best-armed killer in the Cretaceous. Jake watched them play a leaping, screeching, wing-beating game of king-on-the-mountain over the dead duckbill; the velociraptors using time-outs to tear off hunks of flank meat, while the pterosaurs landed and took off atop the bloody mound, hauling away dangling strands of entrails.

He awoke just as *Tyrannosaurus torosus* returned to reclaim the kill. First light filtered through the shutters. Jake realized that the thudding rumble he felt was not *T. torosus* thundering across the mudflats—it was the *Scott's* paddlewheels slapping the river. They were underway again. Peg lay half atop him—a red-haired sleeping angel. Sliding out from under, he slipped into buckskins and ambled out to see dawn from the middle deck rail. Lamps and lanterns burned dim. Banks rolled by in steel-gray silhouette and heavy shadow, but it was light enough to make out snags on the river, and the faint riffle of sandbars. He saw no sign of pterosaurs or duckbills.

Better yet, no backwoods bloodhound gestapo had stormed aboard to arrest them for assault, slave theft, impersonating fictional characters, and interfering with child abuse. With a megaram memory reaching back into the Mesozoic, Jake had no trouble recalling the night before. Charlotte's anger. Armand's indifference. Peg's fury. Heaven knew what would happen if they did not get downriver in a hurry.

"So, you could not sleep, either."

He spun on his heel. Half a step behind him stood Charlotte, cool and composed in a frothy ball gown, white gloves and parasol—an hour ahead of the sun—her tawny disobedient hair tamed by a tortoise-shell comb. Faint blue hollows beneath her eyes told him that she had missed sleep, or been crying. Jake admitted that last night's nastiness had him dreaming of dinosaurs.

"Dinosaurs?" She pressed her lip in puzzlement.

"Big prehistoric lizards," he explained.

"Like in Hyde Park, *n'est-ce pas?*" Charlotte laughed aloud, showing her teeth. "Daddy took us ta London for the Great Exhibition." She was sharp and knowledgeable, not embarrassed to own a mind ahead of her time.

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Jake nodded. "Only these were carnivores, dripping gore." *Velociraptor* was not near as tame as the fake iguanodons decorating the Crystal Palace gardens.

Charlotte shuddered, her voice softening. "Carnivores indeed. Ah never saw anything so brutal as last night."

Jake lifted an eyebrow. "Surely you have seen field hands beaten." Driving with a whip was common enough.

"Field hands, yes," she eyed him primly from beneath the parasol, "to keep 'em at it. But with women, a crack in the air, or a light stroke across the shoulders is *totally* adequate. *We* know work when we see it—*men* are more likely ta be found lazin' about. There is no need ta beat helpless girls inta the ground. Daddy never, never treats *his people* that way."

His people? Charlotte was choice with her English, never using the word nigger, or even slave—reminding him of Robert E. Lee. (Jake had ridden with Marse Robert at Antietam, doing groundwork for the British North America series.) General Lee hated to say "yanks" or even "the enemy"—calling the bluecoats potting shots at him, "those people." As though they were unruly neighbors. Terribly courtly. But Jake doubted that Charlotte and Bobby Lee had all that much in common, beyond a shared distaste for slavery and vulgar idioms.

Birdsong broke the silence on the water, rising up to surround the *Scott* as the steamer plowed through the greens and gold of morning reflected off the mirror-smooth river. Jake asked if she knew about Armand's losses.

Charlotte grimaced, "Daddy's money's gone—an' we are seven thousan' in debt ta the vultures." Jake ventured that their sole hope was getting to Orleans as fast as manageable. Tipping back her parasol, Charlotte gave the water an intent look. "When we get out ahn the river—free of this low water—we can run night an' day. We'd be in Awlins in no time." By "out on the river" she meant the lower river, below Cairo, where the Ohio flowed in and the water was higher. She continued to scan the flood. "If we get ta Hat Island by dusk, I imagine the pilots would risk runnin' the rest." Hat Island was the last hard crossing above Cairo.

Leaning forward, she touched Jake lightly on the arm, to get his full attention—setting off a thrilling tingle that threatened to short out his compweb. "See how close the pilots are cuttin' their crossin's." The *Scott* had been thrashing comfortably along in midstream, taking full advantage of the current—now, as they rounded a point, the long slanting line of a sandbar lay on the water ahead. But the pilot kept doggedly on, making the shortest course past the sandy scrub-pine peninsula a cable's length to port.

"Look, he's gonna just trim the bar." Charlotte was right. The pilot cut the crossing razor fine, aiming for the low oily spot at the head of the reef, marked by a stagnant sheen on the surface and an ugly tangle of cottonwood snags. As they plowed onto the bar, Jake felt the *Scott* hesitate, refusing to answer the helm, as if she feared shallow water.

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Gripping the rail, he jacked up his microamps to catch the leadsman's calls. "Half twain. . . . Quarter twain. . . . Quarter-less-twain . . . Eight even." Suddenly the suction broke and the *Scott* surged forward, throwing a great wave off the bow, mounting the reef with less than two feet of water beneath her bottom. Jake had seldom seen such a tight crossing.

"We are not the only ones anxious to make Cairo tonight," Charlotte concluded, releasing his arm. He was surprised by how well she knew the river and riverboating. She was far sharper than Armand; alert and curious, with a mind more like Sam Grant's. Eager to talk, and learn. Jake liked that, though it made him wary—Charlotte was no fool, to be fobbed off with fairy tales about Transylvanian royalty. She gave him an immediate jolt, asking, "How long have you known Peg?"

What could he say? Eons? A month's training on Mars? Six months in the Mesozoic? Sixty-five million years since then? "Less than a year—but it seems like much longer."

Charlotte gave a knowing nod—"I can well imagine. Every moment wi' her is amazin'. An incredible woman."

That was Peg. Perfectly incredible. A wonder of nature. A Reformed Vegetarian who hated meat, but happily broke a man's arm. Jake had seen such chemistry before—two lively young women, accustomed to compliments, advances, and flattering attention, tended to discount male approval. They all *knew* what men wanted. Female approval had a depth, dimension, and difference men couldn't offer.

Peg herself appeared, and they traded *bonjours,* bursting into a flood of French. Every so often, sweet honey-haired Charlotte would translate, so that Jake would not be left out. He grinned at the irony. He and Peg were lovers, expedition partners from a horribly advanced society with a universal language—but semi-savage Charlotte had to tell him what Peg was saying. Between translations, he considered how he might make some quick money. The few fifties he carried were hardly working capital—he dearly needed a decent faxcopier and the proper sort of paper.

By breakfast, it was plain that the pilots were cutting *every* crossing tight, trying to make time despite low water and a corkscrew channel. Passengers leapt up from their grits and hoecakes whenever the boat passed a point or island, craning to see just how close the pilot meant to cut the next crossing. A race mentality developed, though last night's docking killed any chance of a record run. Riverwise gents in dinner jackets lined the rail, puffing cigars and betting on when they would make Cairo. With side bets on close crossings. Would the pilot mount the reef, or run aground? Westerners wagered on anything.

Odds ran near even until late in the forenoon, when one of the pilots—not Bixby—put the boat aground. That brought everyone to the rail, watching mud boil up from the bottom as the engines labored. By fine-tuning his microamps, Jake could hear commands echoing down the pilot's speaking tube. "Port, port. . . . Now full astern. . . . Snatch her! Snatch her!" The boat stayed stuck. Odds on reaching Cairo that night took a steep plunge. Each hour on the mudbank brought them down

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another notch. Sharps offered two and three to one against getting "out on the river"—and found few takers.

Then Bixby took the helm. The *Scott* shuddered and scraped, groaning as if she meant to give birth. Polite stewards herded the passengers onto the fantail. "Hard a'port, hard a'port. . . . Starboard! Starboard! Full astern," rattled down the speaking tube. The *Scott* raised her bow and slid off the shoal.

"Six-and-inches," sang the leadsman. "Seven feet! Eight. . . ." They were booming down the channel again.

Pressed into the crowd on the fantail, Jake found himself alongside Taylor and the Missourian's teenage mistress—a sad-eyed girl with skin the color of cream in coffee, pretty as Taylor pictured her, but not terribly happy. Her fixed smile faded whenever Taylor looked away. The tall planter took out his watch, a massive Jurgensen with a diamond stem—as cold and expensive as the girl on his arm. He squinted at the timepiece, then snapped the gold cover shut. "That tears it. Another night on the bank. We'll never make Cairo now."

Reaching into his jacket, Jake hauled out one of his fake Atchison notes. "Here's fifty bucks that says we will make Hat Island, and are out on the river tonight."

Taylor blinked, "By Gawd, friend—what odds do yew want?"

Jake shrugged. "Whatever you think fair."

"This morning, I would have asked two-ta-three. Now I'd put two hundred against the fifty—an' still call it theft."

"Done," Jake declared.

Taylor grinned, saying that he was glad to get back some of what he had lost to Forrest the day before. Word spread among the sporting types that the gent named Butler was as good as giving away fifties, betting that they would clear Hat Island despite the delay. Charlotte tugged at his arm, aghast, asking if he had gone mad—"You're another lunatic gambler. Bad as Armand."

"We need the money," he reminded her, rumpling a fifty to make it more like backwoods currency. "Besides, this isn't gambling."

She snorted, "What would yew call it?"

"A sure thing."

Peg dismissed Charlotte's alarm. Coming from a society without money, Peg would not have known a fifty-dollar bill from a French postcard. She habitually left all such decisions to Jake. It was his *job* to get her back to civilization; if that required betting on riverboats, or running buffalo with Sitting Bull, it was fine with her. The grounding and commotion even brought Armand out of bed and onto the middle deck, whiskey in hand, complaining of a vicious hangover. He took immediate interest in Jake's wagering—but with flat pockets, all he could do was hold the stakes and watch.

Odds shifted throughout the afternoon, falling near to even as the pilots made better time, leaping back to three and four to one at every

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delay and bad crossing. His betting partners entertained Jake by extolling the horrors of the Hat Island crossing, with its maze of snags and sunken reefs—"not ta mention the wrecks of previous boats." The only *safe* way to run the reef was to shave the island so close that the stewards could "pick plums from the Texas rail." Jake continued to pull in bets, finding himself the subject of keen attention—which couldn't be helped. Deckhands gave him appraising looks. Servants made extra sure his glass was full, with a fresh sprig of mint in his julep. The wild gent in buckskins with the Bowie knife—"Mistah But-lah"—was backing their boat with cash money against half the sharps on board—"an' your confidence in da ol' gal *Scott* is sure appreciated. Yew bet."

Bixby's cub, an apprenticed pilot named Sam with dark curly hair and a well-tended moustache, came down the companionway from the hurricane deck to get "a lungful of air." The young Missourian claimed that things were too tense in the pilothouse for anyone as lowly as a cub pilot to dare draw breath. No one was standing regular watches—each man ran whatever bit of river he knew best. Sam went back up, swearing that if they just cleared Hat Island he meant to give up cigars and spirituous liquors, "for at least the balance of the week."

By sunset, Bixby was back at the wheel. Pocket watches were out as daylight ticked away. With the sun touching the horizon, Hat Island hove into sight; a chorus of "too bad" and "too late" went around the middeck—there was no chance of making the island before dark. Tucking their watches in their waistcoats, gamblers turned to see how Jake took his beating. Armand slapped him on the back, "Losin's not terribly hard. Once ya get the hang of it." Forrest, the bad-mannered shark in a parson's coat, demanded to know when Jake planned to pay up.

Quietly, Jake asked Armand for the stake money. Counting out ten fifties, he held them up for Forrest and the others to see. "Here's $500 that says Bixby runs Hat Island *in the dark.*"

"Damn," Armand shook his head, "yer worse than *I* am. That money is already lost." Taylor agreed.

"A side bet," Jake insisted, waving the money under Forrest's long nose, "Four to one. Or eat your words."

"Wait," demanded Benson, "what ya gonna *pay* us wi' when yew lose?"

"Take it out of his hide!" roared Forrest, grabbing the $500. Benson and Taylor backed down, not looking eager to challenge the big mean-spirited parson and his brace of pistols. Jake's detectors also showed a knife in the man's boot and a blackjack up his sleeve. Reverend Forrest must have taught a tough Sunday school class.

Attention turned to the pilot house, listening for the three bells that signaled that the boat would land. The sun set. No bells rang. The boat bore on, thrashing into the gloom above Hat Island. Sporting gents on the middle deck exchanged amazed looks. A call echoed off the hurricane roof, "Starboard lead, larboard lead!"

Out of the darkness in the bow came the sonorous chant of the leadsman. "By the mark three. . . . Quarter-less-three. . . . Half twain. . . ." The river was shoaling beneath the hull.

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"By God, he aims to run it!" breathed Benson. The crowd around him gave an amen. And then silence. With Bixby at the wheel, the whole huge boat with its load of paying passengers, penned slaves, plush carpets, crystal chandeliers, and quarter million in cargo was bearing down on the Hat Island bar—running the reef and sunken wrecks, low water or no.

Bixby rang two bells. Jake's microamps picked up the jingling reply from the engine room. Steam whistled though the cocks. Engines stopped beating, and the great boat slowed, drifting downstream without enough steerageway to answer the rudder. By now, the night was bone black, the only mark of progress being the eerie cry of the invisible leadsman—"Quarter-less-twain. . . . Eight-an'-a-half. . . . Eight even!" The bar was rising up beneath the drifting boat, ready to tear the bottom out. "Look!" cried a voice in the night, "the Island!" Adjusting his lenses for night vision, Jake saw the head of Hat Island looming over the boat. Bixby's voice descended the speaking tube, ordering the engine room to stand ready. Forrest stood frozen half a pace away, the $500 clutched in his hand, sweat beading on his bearded face. Taylor's mouth hung open. His slave-mistress was wide-eyed.

"Seven-an'-a-half. . . . Seven. . . ." The leadsman's calls came quicker.

With only inches of black water under the bow, Jake heard branches bang against the overhead rails. Hat Island was reaching out to snag the *Scott*. A sudden lurch, then the dreaded grate of wood on sand. Benson blinked and swallowed, "Heaven help us, we've touched bottom!" A moment more and it would be all-hands-to-the-pumps.

Bixby's voice banged down the speaking tube—"Full ahead! Hard down, Ben—Give 'er all she's got. Snatch her! Snatch her hard!" Steam slammed into the cylinders, timbers groaned as the huge boat hung on the reef, dragging in the sand. With a convulsive shudder, she mounted the bar and slid down the other side. The leadsman in the bow sang out, "Nine feet. . . . Nine-an'-a-half. . . . Ten. . ." And then, "By-the-MARK-TWAIN."

They were back booming full bore down the channel. Jake plucked the $500 from Forrest's startled grasp, saying, "Thankee, gents. Drinks on me when we get to Cairo."

Pandemonium erupted. Cheers rang and bells clanged. Sports at the rail raised a yahoo, lighting up cheroots and slapping backs. Benson pumped Jake's hand, saying he'd be damned if he had seen the like. Gents who could not wait for Cairo brought out bottles, toasting Jake and Bixby. From pilothouse to engine room, the boat rocked with good feeling and relief—except perhaps for the slaves chained in steerage, though if the *Scott* had ripped her bottom out on the Hat Island reef, they'd have been the first to know.

Gamblers began to pay up. Jake braced Forrest for the $2,000, wary of the pair of pistols in the man's belt. Frowning, the tall bearded gambler pulled a bundle of bills from inside his parson's coat, counted out his losses, spit a quid of tobacco onto the money, then handed it to Jake.

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Good feeling went only so far. Charlotte giggled in Jake's ear, "That's Daddy's $2000—he's the man who fleeced Armand." Jake saw a measure of justice. Forrest merely glared hard at her.

The party lasted out the midwatch, and into the morning, seeing the *Scott* well "onto the river." Jake awoke next afternoon in high fettle, in time for Peg and Charlotte to hurry him through a late breakfast. They had an invitation to ascend to the pilot house—Bixby wanted to meet the man who bet on Hat Island. Armand stayed comatose, snoring impressively.

Jake took his coffee on the Texas deck, surveying an utterly splendid day. The river spread in all directions, looking like a broad shining arm of the sea, dotted with barges and flatboats—the final vestige of the great Mesozoic seaway Jake had flown over sixty-five million years before. Dense woodland lined the banks, broken by farms, woodyards, and plantation docks. The Illinois shore was long gone—now there were slave states on either hand, Missouri to starboard, Tennessee to port. His compweb kept thankful track of each passing kilometer. They were well below Belmont (where Grant's first battle would be fought), in the big loop between Island No. 10 and New Madrid. To the north lay the drowned lands of southern Missouri, to the south rose great precipices shielding the Tennessee interior. The river was so twisted that they were steaming nearly due north to get south—half the trip could have been saved by walking to Memphis.

The pilothouse was a roomy glass cupola, with red-gold curtains, a big woodstove, brass spittoons, and a highbacked bench for the "river inspectors"—visiting pilots who traveled at company expense to check the level of water "out on the river." (They favored the grandest boats with the best service, so the *Scott* was a natural choice.) But today the splendid glassed-in cabin was deserted, except for Bixby, his cub Sam, and a white-aproned Texas tender named Hosea, who served iced tea and fresh coffee. The great Bixby proved to be a slender alert gent just over thirty, with curly hair and a captain's bearing. He did very little in the way of piloting. The water level was ample, the banks clearly marked. His cub clung nervously to the wheel, following the crooked channel. Every so often, Bixby would call for a sounding, remark on some passing point, or take a moment to reprimand Sam's steering; otherwise, he was content to relax on a leather sofa, basking in the glory of having run Hat Island in the dark. He asked Jake, "How could you know I would run the reef? I did not decide myself until near to dusk."

Jake dodged the truth—that he had read it in a book which would not see print for decades—instead falling back on "gambler's instinct" and hinting he had tremendous faith in Bixby's piloting. (Which he did.) He took care not to lay it on too thick; Bixby was not the sort to fall for flattery. Like most people who were extremely good at what they did, Bixby was his own best critic, with a level estimate of his abilities. It was safer and simpler for Jake to play the spendthrift sport with more nerve than sense—the river was brimming with them.

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The women surprised them by demanding that the white-haired steward introduce himself, and join in the conversation. Charlotte had a very natural way with servants and slaves, never showing a hint of color prejudice. (Peg hardly knew such a thing existed.) It turned out that the steward's name was not Hosea, but Cundazo-soo-zaduka. He spoke Cajun French, English, and several African tongues, having been born in Guinea to a good family—then kidnapped and brought to America some fifty years back. Charlotte claimed that she could tell breeding, even in a riverboat butler, and did not doubt that he had been a prince in Africa. The old ex-slave was plainly touched. "If the young miss means to make me an African prince—then ah guess that's what I was." He told stories about his boyhood in Africa and about first seeing the Blue Ridge—"lyin' on the horizon like a dark piece of heaven."

Since Hosea had his freedom, Bixby asked if he ever considered going back to Africa—"You being a prince there an' all." Hosea laughed, "White folks is always tryin' ta get us ta go back ta Africa—an' after all that bother of bringin' us here! No, suh. When I get too old for the River, I'll live all the time in Awlins. There's where the variety is, the music an' gay society. Rather be eatin' red beans in Awlins than lordin' over all the heathen in Africa."

Conversation lapsed, and everyone enjoyed Sam's antics at the helm. The cub was brand new to downriver piloting, careening all over the channel, climbing the wheel with eyes wide when he thought he saw a shoal coming up. The approach of Memphis ended Sam's ordeal. Bixby rang the landing bells and took the wheel. By the time they left the Memphis bluffs behind, it was dusk, and Bixby's replacement came up. The great man went below, with Charlotte on one arm, Peg on the other, and Prince Hosea carrying the tea tray.

Sam collapsed on the highbacked bench, opening a slim memorandum book and staring hopelessly at the pages.

"Problems?" Jake inquired.

"None whatever," Sam replied, scratching his head. "I just wish I had stuck to my original ambition."

"Which was?"

"Takin' a boat up the Amazon. Bringin' the Good News to the cannibals—or at worst givin' em a change of diet. I was so busy banging both sides of the channel, I couldn't mark the points as we passed."

Seeing the blank pages confronting Sam, Jake could not resist tripping in his compweb and rattling off every point, island, bend, reef, and sounding that Bixby had called out for the whole four-hour watch. "Slow down, slow down!" Sam wrote furiously. It took time, but he got it all down, every last sandbar and cottonwood snag. Then he closed the book, looking cautiously up at Jake—"How did yew *do* that?"

"Gambler's memory," Jake answered airily.

Sam gave him a curious look, pocketing the book. "Well, you've got a passable future in river piloting. I believe we've missed supper, but may I buy you a scotch?"

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"Certainly," Jake smiled, recalling to Sam his vow to give up spirituous liquor if they made Hat Island.

The cub assumed a superior air, "That was a promise made in Missouri. I only intend ta wet the half of me that's in Tennessee."

As they descended the stairs, Hosea came hurrying to meet them, grave and gray-faced. "Mistah Butler, your woman—the redheaded one—is in an uproar. She's breakin' down a stateroom door."

Damning his complacency, Jake took the steps two at a time with Sam at his heels. When they got to the middle deck, a crowd was already gathered. Weaving his way through the throng of servants and curious types, he saw that the door to Armand's stateroom was off its hinges, its oil painting torn and trampled. Peg had Armand down on the floor, practicing hold #2 on him, twisting the little .45 calibre derringer out of his grasp. A grim-faced Charlotte reached down and took the pistol, shoving it into her purse. Armand was sobbing.

Jake stopped at the broken door, his compweb warning him that worse was coming. Peg looked up, explaining in perplexed Universal, "There was nothing else to do. He was going to harm himself."

"Why, in Heaven's name?" Jake asked in English—hoping Charlotte would answer, so he and Peg could preserve some of their cover. But she sat silently, hands folded atop the purse containing the cocked and loaded derringer.

Forrest answered for her, pushing through the crowd. "Mama's boy could not stand his losses." With a mean dry laugh, he explained that there had been another round of poker, and Armand had been the loser.

"What did he bet with?" Jake did not trust Forrest's furstest-with-the-mostest manner.

"Can't say it matters," Forrest shrugged, " 'cause the little flat lost it all. I'm here to claim the last of it."

Charlotte straightened up, turning her back to her brother, saying "Ah am ready," so softly Jake almost needed his microamps to hear her.

"Then come along smartly." Forrest stepped forward.

"Wait." Jake moved to stop them. Peg was still holding Armand face down, his sobs soaking the carpet.

"I'd advise you not ta stick in an' oar," warned Forrest, pulling back his coat to free his gunfighter's rig, his smile alive with malice, goading Jake to make a move.

Charlotte touched Jake's arm, the way she had that morning. "Please," she begged. "Let it be. From the day I was old enough to know, I expected this would happen. The moment has come. There is nothin' ta be done."

"What the Hell?" Jake's mind reeled. Too much was happening for his compweb to keep pace.

"Fooled ya, did she?" Forrest's smile became a cold sneer. "Taken in by a little nigger girl! Takes more than white gloves and a parasol ta hide a mustee from *me*. She's one of yer yellow frenchified niggers, but a nigger none-the-less." He tapped his breast pocket. "An' I got her bill of ownership."

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Peg rocked back, relaxing her hold, ready to spring. She could not follow the words, but she could read faces and intent. Armand moaned and rolled over, holding his head.

Gripping Jake's sleeve, Charlotte looked straight into his face, whispering, "If I don't go now, there is gonna be blood. This ain't yer fight, an' the law will back him." She knew that Peg would not hesitate to go up against a tall villain sporting a knife, blackjack, and brace of pistols. But Forrest had the whole terrible weight of slave society behind him. Peg could not take on the entire boat. Charlotte gave a sharp shudder, letting go of Jake and following Forrest out.

"How could he take her?" Peg demanded in alarmed Universal. She was on her feet, undecided and uncomprehending, but ready to dive through the broken door if necessary and drag Charlotte back despite the arsenal Forrest toted about.

Jake could feel her gaze on him, urging him to set things right. Angry and helpless, he jerked Armand upright, determined to shake sense out of the sodden oaf, still busy being sorry for himself. "So Charlotte's not your sister?"

"Half-sister," Armand admitted, spilling the whole story between sobs. "Mother died when I was born. Daddy had a quadroon mistress—already with child, meant ta be my wet nurse." Daddy had simply renamed his mistress Marie, same as you would give a new name to a dog or a horse, and she mothered both children. "She's the only mother I knew," Armand whimpered. "I was at her breast before Charlotte Marie was even born." That made Charlotte an octoroon—the daughter of a white and a quadroon. It explained so much, including the gloves and parasol at every hour of the day. She must have been terrified of darkening up, of showing her mother's color. Poor, poor Charlotte. She should have stayed in London. The second she set foot on British soil she was free. Only her home held her in bondage.

Jake demanded that Armand hand over his flask. Bracing himself with a fast dollop of scotch, he tried to explain to Peg—no easy task. "But she is more white than black," Peg objected. Charlotte was easily two shades lighter than Jake's Mesozoic-Mississippi tan.

"Doesn't matter," Jake told her. Not for nothing was slavery known as "the peculiar institution"—a charming combination of racism and rapacious profit making. The product of master and slave was legally a slave—perfectly saleable. Even though large parts of the free white population had no hope of correctly naming their fathers, the fact that one of Charlotte's eight great-grandparents had been black made her a saleable commodity, like molasses or moonshine (more so, since moonshining was technically illegal—unlike the sale of young women).

Peg was shocked, "That's absurd!"

"No, it's the law." Jake did not try to argue the justice of it. Turning back to Armand, he demanded, "Why the Hell didn't her father free her?" Daddy could have done it anytime.

Armand shook his head. "Father always plays his cards close ta the

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vest. He would have freed her—when she got ta be twenty-one, or if he found her the right husband. Till then, I was supposed to look out for her."

Jake swore softly—half in Universal, half in Lakota. "But instead, you lost her to that bastard Forrest. How in hell did you get back in the game?" The answer was horribly obvious, but he wanted to hear it from Armand.

The elegant idiot mopped his nose, looking miserable. "I bet yer money."

"And lost it." Jake got madder by the microsecond, saddled with this self-indulgent clown. That money had been Jake's backup, his safety margin in a merciless period when everything was for sale: Life. Love. Liberty. Even people. It was lucky that Charlotte had taken the derringer, because Jake would have cheerfully returned it to Armand, helping him steady his aim and work the trigger.

"Ah lost it all," Armand sniffed, "ta the last *sou*."

Jake looked around the cabin. It was clean as a whistle. "No baggage, no belongings?"

"Yours also," the hopeless ass hid his head in his hands.

Jake's jaw dropped. Alarms clanged in his compweb. "What about my lock box, and my possible sack?" Spinning about, Jake lunged toward the door, to check their stateroom for the precious Mesozoic recordings. Armand grabbed at the fringe on Jake's leggings, crying, "Wait, it ain't even yer cabin no more. Forrest won that as well."

Peg stood poised and mystified, but bursting to take action—mercifully the last exchange had not been translated. Shaking off Armand's alcoholic grip, Jake shoved a path through idlers in the hallway, making for his former stateroom. Forrest would not be able to open the lock box, but he was bound to be puzzled by what he found in the beaded possible sack. Given the man's slim wits and short temper, he might leave off trying to figure out what the contents were for and just heave 'em in the river.

Jake grabbed the porcelain knob. The door was latched. He pulled and pounded. A gruff voice advised, "Go away."

He pounded louder.

"Damn yew!" yelled the man inside. "I'm busy—an' in no need o' company!"

Peg was at Jake's shoulder, determined to know what was happening. Instead of answering, he told her, "Break down the door." She stepped back, aiming a karate kick. "Be careful," he warned, drawing his stunner, "the fellow is armed."

A high-pitched yell echoed within, followed by the hollow boom of black powder .45. Jake flinched, but no bullet burst through the door. Compweb and microamps told him something soft had stopped the ball.

Peg completed her kick. The door crashed open in a shower of splinters. Gunsmoke spilled into the hall.

Jake stepped inside, stunner in hand. Forrest staggered backward into

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his arms, looking absolutely astonished and bleeding furiously. A fist-sized spot of blood on the man's shirtfront became an expanding blotch, staining the white shirt, wetting his pants, streaming down his coat sleeves. Charlotte sat on the lower bunk, wedged against the wall, small and defiant, tears rolling down her cheeks, the derringer clutched in her gloved hand—smoke curled up from the pistol's wide round muzzle.

Down-the-River

Gawkers crowded about the busted stateroom door as Jake bent over the dying bastard, doing his damnedest. Derringers are notoriously useless at even a dozen feet, but at arm's length, Charlotte didn't need to be Daniel Boone to put a ball the size of a hickory nut through Forrest's pump. Tearing open the gambler's shirtfront, Jake did what he could with CPR and a medikit. Servants worked around him, righting furniture and mopping up.

Not finding a flicker of a pulse, he gave up playing Florence Nightingale; nothing shy of cardiac surgery could have saved his patient, and Jake was not up to doing open heart work with bare hands and a Bowie knife. Hell, he had not much liked the man to start with—the homicidal card shark had been totally detestable even on a two-day acquaintance. Straightening up, Jake passed the flask of scotch to Sam, telling him to bar the doorway and keep the crowd at bay. He needed time and space to think in.

Sam propped himself in the doorway, taking a sip and eyeing the splintered door. "Sure 'nuff—only teach your woman the proper way to enter a room. By the time we make Bayou Sara, there won't be a serviceable door aboard the steamer."

Splashing his hands in the basin, Jake asked Charlotte what happened—for form's sake. The evidence was almighty plain. Pushing honey dark hair out of her eyes, she stared hard at the far wall, as though she could read her future in the filigree, avoiding the body sprawled on the floor. "He tole me he was gonna teach me ta behave. Claimed my frenchified ways had given me airs—but fortunately, he knew the cure. I told him not ta touch me. He grabbed me anyway, sayin' a nigger must learn never ta say no, swearin' he was a hands-on trainer. I warned him again, but he would not let go."

Enough said. Jake pocketed the derringer and nodded to Peg. With the help of Taylor's young mistress, Peg hustled Charlotte into the adjoining stateroom, where she would not have Forrest lying eyes-up in front of her. The crowd at the door parted hastily, closing behind them. Hosea, Prince of Africa, directed the clean-up, working with a tear in his eye that wasn't for the deceased. Jake asked Sam what jurisdiction they might be in. Sam shrugged, returning the flask, and owning that river justice was horribly chancy. "Depends on where we land. Helena is the next port of call. I guess Arkansas will hold the trial."

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"Hain't gonna be no trial," Hosea shook his whitehaired head. "Befo' I had my freedom, I was a groom in West Texas. I saw a Mexican girl stab a white man ta death—defending her husband. Weren't no trial. They took her to a bridge over a creek an' hung her. She were pretty an' game—jes like Miss Charlotte. Took off her hat, tossed it ta the crowd, an' put the noose around her own neck. They gave her a cheer an' pushed her off. Arkansas will do the same ta Miss Charlotte—hain't no call for a trial." Prophecy complete, Hosea departed, bearing a load of bloody laundry.

Sam stepped smartly aside. Captain Fitz-Roy pushed through the crowd, grimfaced—with Bixby in his wake—demanding to know what the hell was happening aboard his boat. From the damage to the door and the gory mess Jake had made attempting CPR, it looked like Forrest was done in with a howitzer. Jake outlined events. Witnesses abounded, and any attempt to embroider would only annoy Fitz-Roy.

Muttering a genteel curse, the Captain dropped to his knee, telling Bixby, "I aim ta get the possessions—be my witness." Going through Forrest's coat and trousers, Fitz-Roy came up with a card pack, the knife and blackjack, Charlotte's bill of ownership, and a bundle of cash. Forrest's Colts hung by the door—he must have figured fists, knife, and lead sap were sufficient for what he wanted to do. Fitz-Roy passed each object to Bixby, who handed them on to Sam.

Jake made an apologetic noise, pointing out that some of the man's so-called possessions belonged to him—"Most particularly a Lakota possible sack. Also some money. But mainly the sack."

Fitz-Roy stood up, shaking his head, "My dear Count Dracula, that is not how I heard it. Ah fear you have even lost your claim to this cabin."

Dear Count Dracula? Armand was as hopeless at keeping a "secret" as he was at holding onto money. Jake did his best to act the outraged Rumanian aristocrat; after all, Forrest would not be needing the stateroom—they could gladly roll the gambler up in the bloodstained carpet and plant him in the river, anything more elaborate being a waste of valuable bottomland. Fitz-Roy grimaced, "No, no, my dear Count, Mr. Forrest will be gettin' other accommodations. But there are previous claims on his cabin an' property." He turned slightly—Taylor and his hee-hawing partner had worked their way to the front of the crowd. "These two had a compact with the deceased."

Benson gaped down at the corpse, but Taylor smoothly produced a notarized piece of paper, declaring it was a contract between himself, Benson, and Forrest, stipulating that in the event of a death the two survivors would divide the estate—"This man's effects, the contents of his cabin, *any* slaves he owns, all come ta us." A typical river gamblers' tontine. The Missourian evidently thought Charlotte was not a total loss, or that some use might be squeezed from her before handing her over to Arkansas law.

The best defense is counter-attack. Jake ignored the proffered compact, taking Forrest's cards from Sam, flipping through the deck, his compweb

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comparing faces to the speckled pattern on the backs. Just-noticeable differences leaped out in the upper-left corners—the seemingly random speckles shifted from card to card; patterns rotated, dots appeared and disappeared. Forrest's winning streak was explained.

He passed the pack to Fitz-Roy, "These are marked."

"Really?" the captain raised an eyebrow.

"Hold up a card."

Fitz-Roy slipped a card out of the middle of the pack and held it up, the speckled back towards Jake.

"Big Casino. Ten of diamonds."

"By damn, they *are!*" swore Fitz-Roy. "How could you tell?

His compweb had easily broken the code—but that was minor. "How else could the prime loser at the poker table turn out to be this crook's heir?"—Jake gave the corpse a healthy kick. Forrest did not complain, but Taylor reared back, sputtering indignation, saying that he never knew the cards were "readers." Expressing mild disbelief, Jake put his case to Fitz-Roy. "You've got a gambling ring on your boat. Go through Forrest's money—you'll find a batch of newly issued Atchison bank notes. Everyone knows I bet those notes on the Hat Island crossing—and won. A dozen gents saw me snatch them out of Forrest's hand last night. How did they get back in his pocket? Bixby and Sam can swear I spent the whole afternoon in the pilot house, and never so much as passed the poker tables." He was setting Armand up for robbery—but, frankly, he did not give a damn, the drunken oaf deserved it. A stint in jail might sober him up. "Forrest fleeced your passengers with marked cards, while these two happy losers pulled in victims." They had acted as a pair of high-class shills, Benson posing as an amiable Bacchus, while Taylor played the well-heeled planter with his coffle of slaves and pretty yellow mistress. Only now Jake had flipped the cards about. The contract they hoped to collect on became damning evidence.

Fitz-Roy looked stricken. River captains tolerated gambling as part of the entertainment—run your boat like a Sunday school, and you could count on traveling half empty—high-flying planters, stupid with cotton money, were the lifeblood of the luxury trade. But for a big expensive boat like the *Scott* to harbor cheats would cost even *more* customers. Fitz-Roy glanced to his pilot for support. Bixby too looked taken aback—the man who would soon be running Grant's gunboats had no sympathy for Taylor's commerce in women. The *Aleck Scott* was a curious microcosm of slave society. She was headed south, her hold stuffed with human cargo and her saloon crammed with boozy gents cheating each other with cheerful abandon, but she was steered by a Yankee pilot and run by a black crew. From the minstrel band on the boiler deck to the stokers in the hold, free labor kept the *Scott* fed, happy, and afloat. Cads like Forrest got everyone to knuckle under by blustering about threatening violence—but fewer and fewer folks liked it. In four years, Grant and Lincoln would call their bluff. From Bixby, Sam, and Hosea, right down to

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the humblest deckhand—none of the crew cared to have a hand in hanging Charlotte. In their eyes, Forrest had tried to compound robbery with rape, and Charlotte had paid him off with an ounce of lead—a jim-dandy occasion for drinks all around.

But it would not be up to the crew. Unless Jake acted fast, Charlotte's fate would rest with a Philips County judge and jury, who were bound to take a sterner view of young women ventilating their owners.

Taylor temporized, telling Jake, "My partner and I would be pleased ta return anythin' yew can prove is yours." The Missourian had made a better offer than he knew. The Mesozoic recordings were all FTL would care about—easily worth a million Charlottes. Taylor was offering to let Jake skate Home with the secrets of the Cretaceous. In fact, regulations *required* him to do just that—FTL's prime directive being *don't fuck with the locals.* The future did not give a hoot about what happened to Charlotte Marie d'Anton.

Fitz-Roy turned to Jake—"My dear Count Dracula, would that satisfy?"—he plainly hoped it would.

"No. Not near enough." Remembering Charlotte's musical laugh that morning, Jake could not stand the image of her life being jerked out of her by a noose and her slim body tossed into a lime pit, just to please FTL and the state of Arkansas. Inability to follow regulations was a serious character flaw, but one Jake had to live with, even if it cost him the scientific prize of the ages. Besides, Peg would break both his legs if he didn't save Charlotte.

But if he pushed too much, Fitz-Roy would turn the whole mess over to a judge. Trying to sound forthright but not surly, Jake swore on his honor as a Transylvanian Count that he had no intent to evade the law. He merely meant to settle the matter of ownership (then head off into the blue with Peg and Charlotte, as soon as Fitz-Roy showed them his back). "Give me a fair chance at one of your stud tables," he demanded. "A single game of Down-the-River, with a square deal and an honest deck. Winner take everything."

Fitz-Roy brightened. Jake was proposing something irresistible to the river temperament—an *affaire d'honneur,* with poker cards in place of pistols. "That's more than square," declared the captain, seeing a way to satisfy both honor and crew. Win or lose, no blame could be laid on *him.* Taylor tried to wriggle loose, protesting innocence, citing his notorious run of bad luck. Fitz-Roy tut-tutted, "Nonsense, friend. You saw the good Count read Forrest's cards, like they were a dime novel. Luck had nothing to do with it. Either meet the count at the table, or throw in yer claim." The crowd clamored agreement. Taylor's new-found aversion to poker got nothing but a good guffaw. First a murder, now a sudden death round of cards—this promised to be one memorable night on the river. Taylor had to go along, or lose what little credit he had left; besides, with Benson to back him, he had a better than even chance. Jake had to beat both of them to win.

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All that remained was to put it to Peg in the neighboring cabin, standing watch over Charlotte like a lioness with a wounded cub. Armand lay on a bunk looking mournful. Jake couldn't muster a milligram of sympathy. Things would have gone far smoother if Armand *had* managed to blow his brains out. But he'd bungled that too. As quick as he could translate events into Universal, Jake told Peg what was happening. She was incredulous. "A card game? Over such a serious matter?"

Jake assured her that serious matters were better left beyond the law. The alternative to poker was trial by jury, a quaint anachronism discarded centuries before Peg was born. "The question would be put before a semi-random panel of twelve citizens—from which all women and non-whites are specifically excluded."

Peg was increasingly appalled. "Excluded? For what possible purpose?"

Jake shrugged—"I suppose to secure a conviction in cases like that." Slave laws made a vicious mockery out of "trial by your peers." Charlotte would see no pretty young mustees sitting in the jury box. In fact, no women at all—young, old, pretty or plain, slave or free. She'd be a black woman with white man's blood on her lace gloves, facing a panel of slave holders and property owners. Jake did not need Hosea to tell him there would be a hanging in Helena.

"Then let's play cards." Peg took Charlotte's arm and made for the companionway leading to the main saloon, displaying her absolute faith in Jake when it came to pasteboards and paper currency. Ambling behind, Jake paused at the port rail to sip Armand's Glenlivet and slip the derringer out of his pocket. He let the tiny pistol drop into the river, its splash lost in the slap of the huge port paddle wheel. Exit the murder weapon. If only he could have done the same to Forrest. The less evidence to worry a court the better.

The long maindeck saloon was fretted with gold-chased filigree and mirrored like Versailles. Beneath crystal chandeliers, the evening air was blue with cigar smoke, reeking of cheap peach brandy. (Made by pouring raw bourbon over burnt peach pits soaked in fish oil and nitric acid.) Baton Rouge planters and Creole dandies crowded three-deep around the green baize table, sharing brandy smashes with decorative bare-shouldered *cocottes,* their bosoms half out of their ball gowns. All chatting gaily at top volume, while a backwoods bishop thumped his Bible, quoting Jeremiah to the sinning throng.

Stewards bustled about the table, putting out quail *pâté* and a clean spittoon. Jake took a leatherbacked seat opposite his opponents, telling his compweb and microamps to tune in on them, getting baseline readings in order to pick out stress, inflection, sub-vocals, and fluctuations in pulse rate. Benson looked to be a plunger, gorging on *pâté* and bantering with his drinking buddies. But Taylor looked cool-as-be-damned, tight lips locked and serious. He would probably play a neat scientific game.

Flanked by Bixby and Sam, Fitz-Roy counted out $15,000 in flat rectangular mother-of-pearl markers to represent Armand's losses, with

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Charlotte chivalrously valued at $2000. The priceless Mesozoic recordings were hardly valued at all, merely thrown in to round out the prize. The saloon bartender produced a pack of club-cards with plain white backs, passing them to Jake for inspection. After a fast flip through the deck, Jake slid the cards to Sam, saying, "You deal." The cub pilot started to protest. Jake cut him short, insisting they needed a neutral dealer, adding significantly—"Just don't shuffle the spots off 'em."

Sam rolled his eyes and asked if there was any more of that good Glenlivet. Sitting down at the head of the table, he started to shuffle nervously, using a big overhand riverboat shuffle that is really no shuffle at all. Jake passed Sam Armand's flask and settled back, giving Peg and Charlotte a thin reassuring smile.

During the short flip through the deck, his compweb had marked the location of every card. He watched Sam give the pack to Benson to cut—Sam's fast shuffle and cut could not hope to mix the cards completely; the memorized sequence was merely broken into strings of varying lengths. Jake counted on his compweb to reconstruct the deck in his head. As each string appeared in play he would hopefully know what Benson and Taylor's hole cards were, and what cards might be coming up. The game he had picked was "Down-the-River," Seven-Card Stud—a very exact brand of poker, maximizing his advantages. Each player would get seven cards, three down, four up—with betting rounds after the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh cards were dealt. The player who made the best five-card poker hand won the pot.

Sam took the pack back from Benson and looked up at Fitz-Roy. The captain ceremoniously placed $5000 in pearl plaques before each player, saying, "*Messieurs,* you may start—*les jeux sont faits.*" Benson gave a grunt. Taylor shot his cuffs and flexed his fingers, telling Sam to deal.

The cub pilot fumbled out the first cards, three to each player, two down, the final one face up. As the cards flicked out, silence fell over the table and the bishop's lamentations grew louder.

Jake surveyed his own hand and the face-up cards. Taylor showed a five, Benson a deuce. Jake had a jack and seven down, another seven up. Since his compweb got to see the first and last cards dealt, and every third card in between, it was easy to fill in the blanks. Benson had an ace and deuce down. Taylor's hole cards were a pair of queens. It was as if the compweb could look right through the white backs of the club-cards, and *see* Taylor's queens kissing the green baize table. Knowledge did not make Jake's pair any higher—two sevens is a losing hand in Down-the-River. Jake passed.

Taylor eagerly bet $500, sliding five white plaques into the center of the table—confirming that he did have two hidden queens, which beat anything showing. Benson with a pair and an ace matched his partner's $500. Normally Jake would have tossed in his sevens. (The odds ran thirteen to one against a low pair.) But his compweb buzzed to tell him that *if the current string held* the top card in Sam's hand was another seven—the card he needed to beat Taylor's queens. Calling the next card

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in the deck was always problematic—the card could easily be the start of a new sequence—so the compweb kicked the problem to Jake. Trusting to Sam's slovenly shuffle, he shoved $500 into the pot.

Sam dealt. The first card was Jake's seven, followed by a king for Taylor and the nine of clubs for Benson. Everyone bet, Jake buoyed by his three sevens, Taylor counting on his queens, Benson fishing for another ace. Spectators crowded closer, applauding or chuckling at each card.

The next deal produced nothing for Jake, and nothing for Taylor—whose two queens looked horribly lonely. (The compweb predicted Taylor would fold.) But Benson got his ace—the ace of diamonds. (Jake's microamps registered the leap in pulse rate and sharp inhale, as surely as if Benson had shouted, "Hot damn, I matched my ace!") He had aces up, and two cards coming, two chances to make aces-full. Jake quizzed his compweb. The string containing the ace of diamonds went four, jack, seven, and then another ace. If that sequence held, Benson was heading for a neat fall. He could not get his aces full without Jake getting a fourth seven.

Carefully counting out five white plaques, Jake baited the trap. Taylor called, rather reluctantly, but Benson snapped at the bait—doubling Jake's bet. Taylor looked wistfully at the plaques in the pot, then folded his two lonely queens. Jake called Benson's raise. It was just the two of them now.

The next round went as predicted, four and jack—no improvement. Jake checked. Benson pounced, piling ten white plaques into the pot. Jake called. Peg was leaning forward showing a keen interest in the mysteries of poker. Charlotte hung on her arm, looking lovely and woebegone.

Sam announced gravely, "Last cards, gents. Down and dirty."

Two white rectangles skittered across the green table. Jake tipped the corner of his final card. A fourth seven peeked back.

Benson gave a guffaw and shoved the last of the $5000 into the pot. No need to read his pulse to know he had gotten that third ace. He had a full house, aces over deuces. Out of more than two million possible poker hands, only a few score could beat it. Jake called. Flipping over his aces-full, Benson wiped *pâté* off his fingers and reached out to rake in the oversized pot.

Jake shook his head, turning up his down cards.

Benson's outstretched arms sagged against the table. The crowd around him crowed with laughter. Flabbergasted, he stared at the four sevens and his useless aces—"Lookin' like a hawg hit by a hatchet," ventured a bystander. He was busted on the first deal, holding a pat hand that should have been a sure winner. Peg was pleased. Charlotte showed not a speck of emotion—she had troubles that went far beyond a hand of poker, even with her ownership at stake.

"*La partie continue,*" Sam intoned dryly. Now Jake had $12000 to match against Taylor's $3000.

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But Taylor took the next hand with kings-up, getting back $1500 of what he had lost. The fastest most sophisticated computing did Jake not a damn bit of good if he did not have the cards. Peg still smiled, since his losses looked small compared to what he had won from Benson. But it left Jake with only one hand in the deck, and the odds nearly even.

By the third draw of the final hand, there was four thousand in the pot. Jake had a straight to the queen, but only the eight, nine, and ten showing. Taylor had a four flush showing—six, nine, ten, and ace, all spades. According to Jake's compweb, Taylor's down cards were two red treys.

Ace high, Taylor bet a thousand. With the deck out of treys, the Missourian must be trying for the flush, needing one more spade to beat down Jake's straight. Seven spades had seen play. Taylor had four more in his hand, leaving two at large, the jack and the deuce. With only seven cards left in the deck, Taylor should have had almost a one in four chance of filling his flush—sufficient to justify his bet.

But Jake's ace-in-the-hole was the jack of spades. The only remaining spade was the deuce. Little Casino. Taylor's chances were a slim one in seven. Jake queried his compweb. Little Casino lay nestled between the ten of hearts and the five of clubs. No help there. Neither card had been played. Jake decided to go with the odds, matching Taylor's bet and raising him $1500. It would take all Taylor had left to call.

The Missourian eyed the plaques in the pot and the four flush he had showing, estimating chances. He could throw in his hand, leaving with $1,500; not enough to lay a claim to Charlotte, but a handsome two-day's earnings in a dollar-a-day economy. Or he could stake it all on finding that last spade. (Jake's compweb replayed a snatch of conversation from the day before, about how Taylor bet one of his houseboys on a hand "He had not a prayer of fillin'.") But that was with Forrest's "readers." Would he do the same in a real game? Touts and sharps in the crowd begged him to call—taking side bets on each card. At best, Jake showed a possible straight. A spade flush would be a sure winner. Sam sat sweating over the last seven cards, waiting.

Taylor pushed his plaques into the pot. Sam fumbled nervously, just managing to get out the last two face-down cards.

Jake tipped his card up. Shit. The ten of hearts stared back at him—a spattering of blood red splotches. Taylor had to have the deuce, filling out his flush. The compweb's calculations guaranteed it. Little Casino was going to sink Jake, costing him a $9000 pot, leaving Taylor with a healthy claim on Charlotte. Stunned, he sat facing sure defeat after thinking his luck was unbeatable . . . feeling how Benson must have felt . . . he had so needed a win to clear the deck for his getaway. Jake groped for the flask of scotch, unscrewing the cap from the nipple.

"Damn!" Taylor flipped over his final card in blank disgust. It was the five of clubs. He had missed his flush by a single spade.

Jake set down the Glenlivet untouched, his compweb screaming foul—that card should have been the deuce of spades. Sam's clumsy

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overhand shuffle could not have lifted Little Casino out from between the ten and five. But instead of an ace high flush, Taylor was holding a simpering pair of threes. Eager faces looked to Jake.

He turned over his straight to thunderous applause. Men pounded him on the back, saying he was lucky as all get out. One hell of a fine fellow. Jake could only stare at Taylor's five of clubs, sensing something uncanny. Something even megarams of memory could not explain. Maybe miracles *did* happen. He sat back, accepting praise that he did not deserve, for success that went beyond science. Fitz-Roy counted out his money. Strangers vied to buy Jake drinks. Even Taylor leaned across the table to congratulate him, "Damnedest game of Down-the-River I ever saw. Proud ta be at the table—even though I paid for the honor."

Accepting the Missourian's hand, Jake stood up, buoyed by his unexpected triumph, taking the bill of ownership, lining his pockets with cash. Maybe his luck *was* unbeatable. There remained the trifling matter of getting off the boat—but the tide had clearly turned; he figured Fitz-Roy to keep a light watch, a bribable steward or two. Jake had taken infinite pains to appear trustworthy, playing the clean-as-the-prairie gentleman in a den of thieves and gamblers. He was a Rumanian *Count*, for Christ sake! Royalty did not cross the Atlantic to abscond with fugitive slaves. . . .

"Stop!" A barn-sized gent barred his way, standing four-square between the tables. Glenlivet froze in Jake's gut. The fellow had an Arkansas accent as raw as a rusty saw, and he fixed Jake with a peculiar slantendicular look, as though he were trying to be sure of his man. Jake had no such problem—thanks to his compweb, he never forgot a face, or a voice. The last time he had heard that downriver drawl, it had been slurred with hate. This bristling ruffian, popping out of nowhere, was the man whose Bowie knife Jake carried in his belt. It was the shill from the monte game at the Saint Louis docks—his coat still torn and muddy, his disposition unimproved. Behind him crowded his buddies, the squinting dealer and the angry back-up man, waving his bandaged wrist, swearing, "This fellow is wanted fer assault in St. Louiee."

Dragged down to earth, Jake listened to Fitz-Roy's surprised stammer, "Wanted, yew say? On what grounds, suh? Count Dracula's a guest here, came all the way from Russia . . ."

". . . Rumania," called out a scholar in the crowd.

"Dracula, be damned," declared the Shill. "If he's a count, I'm the black-assed Queen of Sheba!" The delicate gent sputtered tobacco juice. "His name's Butler. Rhett Butler. An' he's wanted fer assault, him an' that red-haired whore he runs with!"

Of course, Jake denied it. But who could he call as a witness? Sam Grant was inconveniently far upriver. Armand was worthless, exposed as a lying, thieving drunkard. Charlotte was a slave facing a murder charge. And Peg was his co-defendant. Still, he damned their eyes, demanding to see a warrant—which he knew they could hardly have. Fitz-Roy backed him. "Yes, stranger, where's your warrant? Do you claim to be a constable?"

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The shill quieted down, aiming a foxy smile at Fitz-Roy, "There was no time. We missed this boat at Cairo, an' came down rail from Columbus, just managing to get aboard in Memphis." His gaze shifted to Jake, eyes bright as a Bowie. "But, ah wired ahead. There *will* be a warrant waitin' in Helena."

Blast the telegraph. It was absolutely unfair that a time period with slave labor and outhouse plumbing should have speed-of-light communications! Fitz-Roy asked what good the shill supposed a Missouri warrant would do in Arkansas. "Oh, it'll be all legal-like," the shill assured everyone at the top of his lungs. "My brother is a sheriff down in Columbia—an' he's comin' upriver ta meet us." Columbia, of course. Jake recalled the gent at the bar telling Forrest there was "entirely too much nigger shootin' down around Columbia." Law enforcement in that neck of lower River had to be rare and artful.

The shill cracked a vicious smile—"An' you-all ken *bet* that when we get ta Helena, Count Gawdalmighty But-lah is gonna be damned sorry he took ta assaultin' honest folk." The flint-faced bastard seemed supremely confident that what law there was in Helena would happily back him. More *mal hombres* shoved their way forward, a gaggle of kinfolk, jailmates, and bushwhackers-for-hire, collected as the monte crew came south—two-legged wolves with long guns and double-barreled pistols. The crowd parted pretty sharp for this mean, nervous posse.

Captain Fitz-Roy threw in his cards, turning to Jake and saying he had to hold things over for a judge. "My dear Count, I'm afraid all these charges an' counter charges will never be settled in a night. An' now that yew are the owner o' Miss d'Anton—you'll be wantin' to be gettin' off in Helena anyway. If only to know what'll happen to yer $2,000 property."

Getting off in Helena was the last thing Jake intended; he would gladly prefer to swim the rest of the way to the Gulf, doing the breaststroke through bayous full of gators. But in no time he was sitting in a stateroom—one that had a door—along with Peg and Charlotte, his pockets stuffed with useless cash. On the far side of the door, interested parties and passenger-volunteers took turns standing watch, with the rest of the vigilantes within call. The hideous irony was that, for once, Jake was absolutely innocent. After passing bad money, freeing slaves, destroying evidence, and abetting murder, committing crimes and misdemeanors halfway down the Mississippi, he and Peg were going to be given over to the law for their one more or less legal act—breaking up that rigged monte game. But no amount of truth or bluster could move Fitz-Roy. None of these men were over-weighted with scruples, and the captain knew that if Jake was not guilty of this, he was very likely guilty of something.

Charlotte came over to sit beside him on the bunk, resting her head on his shoulder, having hardly spoken since shooting Forrest. Honey-colored hair spilled onto his chest. In a sweet hushed voice, she asked, "Are you really a Rumanian Count?" Jake admitted that was a fraud.

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"Well, suh, whatever happens, you have been a prince ta me." Warm lips brushed his cheek. Her kiss was heaven, but awfully like a goodbye.

"What now?" asked Peg, clearly game for anything, even taking on the posse barehanded.

"We wait," Jake declared. If it weren't for the monte team, they could have counted on a lax warden and a score of chances to escape. Now they had one slim chance—"In the wee hours, the watch outside will be down to a few sleepy souls that quick use of the stunner should take care of. After that, we improvise." With luck they could steal a skiff and strike out for the Mississippi shore. The *Scott* must have a sounding yawl, maybe even a captain's gig. The absolute worst of it was that they were separated from their luggage. Jake no longer had the possible sack, and could not imagine himself banging about the boat in search of it. He was sunk, contemplating complete ruin even if they somehow escaped. The Faster-Than-Light agency was going to have a cosmic fit when he tried to explain losing the data to a trio of crooked monte players—FTL had a ferocious disregard for extenuating circumstances or innovative excuses. With that cheerful thought foremost, he set his compweb for a couple of hours before dawn and put himself to sleep.

He was still dozing, waiting for the compweb to wake him, when microamps reported a soft rap at the door. The stunner was in his hand before his feet hit the floor. Peg came instantly alert, braced to take action. Belly muscles tensing, Jake tip-toed over, and slipped the latch. Through the doorcrack, he saw Armand looking in, sheepish but sober. Holding a finger to his lips, Armand whispered, "Wake Charlotte Marie."

Peg was already doing that. Opening the door wider, Jake saw the monte dealer and an ugly pair of vigilantes sprawled on the deck, snoring over a clay jug. "Mustah been the booze," chuckled Armand. "Never trust backwoods forty-rod—not fer standin' watch." Behind the young planter was a ring of black faces. Jake recognized a huge roustabout who had a Mandingo accent and ribbed scars on his cheek. Wooden bosun's clubs and lengths of pipe gleamed in the lamplight.

Hosea pushed his way to the front, saying, "Come along, day-clean hain't far off." He hustled Jake, Peg, and Charlotte into the center of the crowd. Tall deckhands and big fellows from the blackgang closed about them. Stepping over the sleeping guards, they marched down the carpeted hall, a moving wall of bodies, passing closed stateroom doors, making for the companionway leading down to the main deck. A late-night tippler staggered down the companionway, took one look at the determined phalanx, and darted up toward the Texas deck. Jake heard landing bells ring as they emerged into the hot black night.

Sam was waiting by the port gangway, holding a hooded lamp. Jake's heart leaped. Piled at Sam's feet were their possessions, including the lockbox and possible sack. The cub pilot tipped his cap—"We have ta make a landin' at the Davis plantation." He nodded toward the invisible Mississippi shore. "Thought you might want ta know."

Swiftly checking the contents of the beaded possible sack, Jake assured

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Sam he was godawful relieved to learn about the unscheduled landing. And happy to have a hand with the luggage. Eternally grateful in fact. Dealing stud was innocent enough, but Philips County might easily call this "aiding and abetting"—itself a hanging offense.

Sam shrugged, "Miss Charlotte deserves a brass band welcome for what she did, with the keys ta Helena thrown in—though a court would not see it that way. But then I guess I've been studyin' middling hard for the gallows myself."

Though the night was black as the Devil's basement, Jake did not doubt the ability of a Mississippi pilot to find the right plantation dock, guided by nothing but the twists in the river. Orders echoed down the speaking tubes and the boat slowed, gliding to a stop. The gangway thumped down. Sam lifted up his lantern, illuminating the circle of crewmen, and the nervous sparkle in his own eyes. "All ashore that's goin' ashore—Count Dracula O'Hara Butler, or whatever yer name turns out ta be. . . ."

Jake bent down, opened the lockbox, and found his copy of *Life on the Mississippi*—fishing out a writing stylus, he turned to the title page. "Make it out to 'Jake.' "

Sam stared at the book, taken clean aback. "What? You want me to sign this 'Sam Clemens'—I never wrote it."

"You will," Jake assured him, "but 'Mark Twain' will do."

Sam shook his head, worried a bit over the stylus, then scrawled "Mark Twain" across the title page. Slipping something into the book to mark the place, he handed book and stylus back, begging, "Get gone, friend. Before we're all standin' in front of a judge tellin' stretchers."

Jake glanced at the title page. The bookmark was a white backed club-card—a black deuce. Little Casino. The two of spades Taylor had needed, but never got. Sam's smile twinkled in the lamplight. Hosea called out in a heavy plantation twang, "Marse Davis—may ah takes yer bag?" Jake, Peg, Charlotte, and Armand hustled down the dock onto the Mississippi shore. The gangway lifted and the *Scott* slid away into the night, churning toward the Arkansas shore, showering sparks in her wake.

The lower river was up. This was Yazoo Delta country, and the Davis plantation dock was a little wooden island, surrounded by marsh and canebrake. Jake hated the risk of waiting until daylight, yet they could hardly blunder off into neck-deep water. Presently a light approached. A lantern in the bow of a skiff, poled by a girl of nine or eleven. Bringing her pirogue expertly up to the dock, she asked in all innocence if they were the mail boat, "comin' early."

Her skiff was a godsend. Jake knelt down into the circle of light cast by the lantern, thumbing through his wad of bills—watching the girl's eyes widen—explaining that they were not the mail boat, but he would pay cash money for quiet passage to some point of solid ground. The urchin eagerly agreed.

Solid ground proved to be some ways off. At first light, they were still poling across flooded bottoms and frog swamp, past cows standing

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placidly in breast-high water and cabins built on stilts decked with hanging moss. Finally the child gondolier brought them to rising ground and a dry road. Jake paid her handsomely, asking where they might catch a train to Memphis. It was plain she had never seen a locomotive in her life, but Jake left her with the absolute impression that they were headed north, to Tennessee and the free states beyond.

At a ferry over the Coldwater, Jake hired a horse and wagon to take them up the bluffs and into Holly Springs, bypassing the railroad to Memphis. Instead they caught the Central line from Grand Junction, headed south. Rolling down the center of the state, Jake's microamps played "City of New Orleans" in time to the beat of the rails, past Oxford and Grenada, along the banks of the Big Black. They changed trains in Jackson, for a Jackson and Great Northern coach car that took them around Lake Pontchartrain into New Orleans, half a day behind the *Scott*.

The FTL way station in New Orleans was a two-story house built on "made ground" below river level—facing a cemetery, row on row of graying marble vaults forming a city of the dead, inhabited by little lizards that crept over the marble tombs snapping up mosquitoes. The house itself was similar to the homes across Canal Street in the *Vieux Carré*, the old French Quarter, with wrought-iron balconies and rose-tinted plaster, reminding Jake of the color of light in wine. The ground floor masqueraded as a dim little voodoo parlor decorated with tasseled hangings, plush cushions, black candles, and parts of small dead animals. The smell of incense, orange peels, and burnt chicken feathers clung to gray lace curtains. Seated behind a crystal ball was Mama Pleasant, the shop's proprietress, who greeted them with a bit of spirit talk, mumbling, "Yew done be expected."

That much was true—FTL informed her whenever a mislaid expedition "done be expected." The rest was mumbo-jumbo. Mama Pleasant was actually a Professor Emeritus of Afro-American Religions from Tulane, semi-retired, running the way station and turning a small profit predicting local elections, steamer accidents, cotton futures, and the like—but never with a hundred percent accuracy, to keep her shop from being overrun by customers. She turned to Charlotte with a crinkled smile, "Young lady, I see yew takin' a long trip." More or less inevitable—wherever Charlotte was going had to be a long way from here.

It fell upon Jake to bid Armand goodbye, giving the astonished young planter all that remained of the money. Jake had no use for it—the Atchison banknotes were his contribution to a chronically underinflated economy. "But what about Charlotte Marie?" Armand stammered. "You're takin' her with yew? I mean, is Rumania a free country?"

"Most days. She'll be well beyond reach of the fugitive slave laws and the Dred Scott decision."

On the long reach of plank walk bordering the river, Jake, Peg, and Charlotte boarded a tiny sea-going tow-boat, with a low tapered hull and

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a high walking beam. No one paid them the least attention. The roadstead was packed with shipping, everything from coasters and fishing smacks to steam packets, tall clippers, and a great line of riverboats. Mama Pleasant steered the tow-boat downriver, past Chalmette and Pointe a la Hache, to the Passes of the Mississippi, that weird end of the river, where the channel runs between thin fingers of land forty miles into the Gulf of Mexico, finally meeting the sea.

Off Grand Pass, Jake, Peg, and Charlotte transferred to a gray schooner-rigged "Baltimore Clipper"—about the best all-around sailer built before the twentieth century, with speed crafted into every line. Charlotte was stunned to discover that the *Flying Dutchman* had no crew. Ghostly holograms worked the rigging and answered hails from the quarterdeck. All done with machinery, Jake assured her. She swore she had never seen the like.

Jake agreed, but suggested she get used to such wonders.

Lines creaked, sails unfurled by themselves, and the anchor came thundering up. In less than a fortnight, the *Flying Dutchman* beat her way around Key West, through the Straits of Florida and the Providence Channel into the Atlantic, showing a clean pair of heels to inquisitive revenue cutters and a Navy brig. A fusion reactor and propellerless drive buried in the hull made sure the *Dutchman* was never boarded for inspection—she would show up only as a log report of a hellishly fast schooner, name and origin unknown, last seen headed hull down into the Bermuda Triangle. This mysterious stretch of ocean that inspired Shakespeare's *Tempest* was renowned for its wrecks and disappearances, a perfect location for the Middle Atlantic Portal. At first light on the final day, Jake got everyone up out of their warm fusion-heated cabins for Transition.

Pale stars shone in a blue-steel sky. A rosy line of light lit the eastern horizon, brightening the water. His compweb counting seconds, Jake's microamps rolled out the final verses of "Amazing Grace":

> *Through many dangers, toils and snares,*
> *We have already passed . . .*

Suddenly, they entered the portal. The *Dutchman* hung suspended in darkness. Charlotte gasped, grabbing at Peg for support. Then the sea reappeared. A different ocean, no longer green-white, but dirty gray, rolling under almost solid cloudbank. Wind whipped up from nowhere, driving a single slanting line of afternoon sun across the water's surface. The *Dutchman* lurched onto a totally new track, masts and cordage groaning, one gunwale slapping at the wave crests.

Charlotte shook her head in wonder, "Where are we headed for now?"

"Paris," Jake replied. "You'll love it." Probably she would—but the Paris that Peg meant to take her to would not be the city of Louis Napoleon, Victor Hugo, and George Sand, of Delacroix frescoes and Millart operas. It was no longer even the capital of France (a country nearly

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as long gone as antebellum America). Peg's Paris was merely a pleasant touristy branch of Megopolis.

Jake's corneal lenses picked out a spark of light, dropping through the hole in the overcast, then skimming low over the waves, growing larger—an FTL heliship. Wind sang in the rigging as "Amazing Grace" rolled to a finish.

Shall I be wafted to the sky,
On beds of flowery ease?
While others seek to win the prize
And sail on bloody seas.

Bracing himself against the heave of the deck, he picked up the beaded possible sack, and prepared to board, happy that any mishap from here on could hardly be laid on *him.* ●

MARRIAGE, THE BODY OF THE BEAST

In that house
There was an unglaciated region—
But not the bedroom.
The cold bluegreen ice
Crept downward from the headboard
A few inches a day.
Much to their surprise,
The last storm,
A thundersquall of accusations and demands,
Had revealed
The perfectly preserved body
Of a woolly mammoth,
Tusked and toothed,
Stony-eyed in death.
In the melting heat
Of their most recent reconciliation,
They made an altar on the moraine,
Tore bloody chunks from the body
To feed each other,
Blood staining hands and cheeks,
And danced naked in solitary celebration;
For within the umbra of the glacial shadow,
They could not see each other.

—Sandra Lindow

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IN MEMORIAM

BAIRD SEARLES

1936-1993

Baird Searles died earlier this year at the age of fifty-eight. His death has been a painful loss to his family, friends, and colleagues. It has also been a deeply saddening one for all of us at *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine.

For fourteen years, Bay was a part of the stimulating diversity that makes up the pages of *Asimov's*. His reviews were witty, entertaining, and insightful. He was respected by his peers for his honest and even-handed approach to each book. He was well-loved by our readers, who found his reviews straightforward and reliable, and who praised them in numerous letters to the editor.

Bay was a delight to work with. Besides being a highly dependable columnist, he was a cheerful and encyclopedic source of information. In the eleven years that he and I were colleagues, we met on only a handful of occasions. Still, we developed a friendship through the mail and over the telephone wires, and I will miss both the friend and the professional.

We've asked Bay's family and friends to pay tribute to the private man as well as the professional. We are honored to share these memories with our readers.

—Sheila Williams

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Science fiction has lost another True Believer. Baird Searles died of cancer this spring in Montreal, where he'd moved in 1990 with his partner and companion Martin Last, to get away from the New York City rat race. Bay was passionately in love with wonder, and that love affair influenced every aspect of his life.

Most people knew him as a critic, through his book reviews here and in other publications, his film column in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* or as editor and co-author of two introductions to the field, *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction,* and *A Reader's Guide to Fantasy.* He wrote the *Cliffs Notes* on Heinlein, and on Tolkien, and changed how millions of American kids looked at SF and fantasy.

Bay had the perfect combination of skills to be a great SF critic—a brilliant, skeptical intellect combined with a hopeful childlike heart. But he never forgot the awestruck joy that brought us here in the first place. He knew the true meaning of the maxim: The Golden Age of Science Fiction is fourteen.

"People say they want books that are just like the ones they read when they were first starting to read SF," he told us once. "I can't think of anything more horrible. I want books that make me feel now—with my jaded palate and demanding expectations—the way I felt when I was fourteen."

He knew that his readers were looking for the same things. He would always tell you what he liked about a book before he skewered its faults. His voice was that of a chatty, opinionated friend whose views you respect, even when you don't agree with him. He wrote with irony and enthusiasm, good humor and bad puns, in a style so well calibrated that when he gushed over a book, you knew it was True Love.

This gift for putting himself in the mind of the audience also informed his film criticism. Baird Searles was the reviewer who first made sense of Kubrick's *2001,* when other critics were still baffled. He was the person who pointed out that the film world was dependably a generation behind print SF—and then crowed in delight when state-of-the-art films like *Blade Runner* and *Brazil* proved him wrong. He could be forgiving of a sentimental movie like *Forbidden Planet,* because of its wide-eyed innocence, and its allusions to Shakespeare, but ruthless toward an ambitious film like *Dune,* because of its artistic pretensions.

His love of the field also helped him to be a successful businessman, as proprietor of The Science Fiction Shop in Greenwich Village, and as an editorial consultant to Warner Books. He was one of the pioneers of genre-specific specialty stores and SF by mail order. He helped to streamline the national jobber distribution system for books, magazines, and comics. He was unstinting with help and advice to others who wanted to start their own stores. Baird Searles was charming, witty, and extraordinarily generous with his time and wisdom. To us he was also a friend and mentor, who profoundly influenced our lives and our work.

We first met Bay and Martin

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shortly after we moved to New York City in the mid-1970's. We'd just graduated from college, and were determined to become Rich and Famous in publishing. (It took us several years to understand how ridiculous that notion was.) As lifelong SF and fantasy addicts, we naturally gravitated toward The Science Fiction Shop, a tiny little bookstore in the Village just south of 14th Street. It was a miraculous place that looked like the interior of a 1950s spaceship that had been refitted as a library. Everything about it suggested a careful attention to design and detail. There was a tiny display window with a tableau made up of robots and dinosaurs, which changed monthly to illustrate featured books. Even the "O"s in the shop's sign depicted the phases of the waxing moon, echoing the curves in the rocket ship design of the shop. On one of the walls of the shop was a quote from J. G. Ballard maintaining that science fiction was the mainstream of twentieth-century fiction. We instantly felt at home.

The Shop's proprietors proved to be an inexhaustible fountain of information about the field. Martin, who resembled John Lennon's more muscular cousin, was the calm, quiet one, with a taste for "New Wave" writers such as Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, and Samuel Delany. Baird Searles, who resembled a satyr from a classical ballet, right down to the red hair and beard, was an SF classicist, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of SF and fantasy.

Bay was exuberant in his enthusiasms, and scornful in his dislikes. He had opinions about everything—books, films, art, dance, music. When he recognized a kindred spirit, he immediately pushed them toward his own favorite writers—Heinlein and Tolkien, of course, but also Olaf Stapledon and William Hope Hodgson, C.L. Moore and Stanley Weinbaum, Robert Graves and Naomi Mitchison, Richard Purtill and Thomas Burnett Swann, Jane Gaskell and Angela Carter.

But Baird never let his own very strong prejudices get in the way of what he believed was his primary mission—to put the right book in the hands of the right reader. If you expressed an unshakable preference for a sort of work he personally deplored, he would shake his head and then carefully pick out other works of the same sort he thought you would enjoy. (It was that mission, and years of experience, that led to the creation of the two readers' guides.) Our conversations with Bay and Martin helped to shape our own views of SF and fantasy. In order to hold our own, we had to develop strong opinions of our own, and that meant we have to have a broad knowledge of the field and its history.

After we'd hung out at the Shop long enough to become regulars there, we were invited to one of Bay and Martin's legendary New Year's Eve parties. The guests were an interesting mix of people. They included Chip Delany and *Playboy's* fiction editor, Alice Turner. The main event was a game of Killer Charades that lasted half the night, played in earnest and with a great deal of ferocious intelligence and high-level silliness. We got back to our apart-

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ment at dawn, feeling we'd finally found the "real" New York we'd come to the city to discover.

We became regular guests at their place for dinner and movies. (Both Bay and Martin loved gadgets, and they were among the first people we knew to own a VCR.) Bay had been a dancer on Broadway in the 1950s, and he'd compiled an outrageous collection of lavish production numbers from movie musicals. He also had a soft spot for costume epics, especially those with brawny heroes and voluptuous vixens. Long before "Mystery Science Theater 3000," we enjoyed the experience of watching an exquisitely bad SF or fantasy film with appropriately rude commentary.

We also discovered Bay's serious side. He had a strong sense of justice, and a contempt for intolerance borne of his own life experience. He described what it was like to be a member of an openly gay couple years before it was acceptable to do so. We heard his account of the surge of pride that swept through the gay community in the wake of the Stonewall riots. And we witnessed his support for young people traveling the road he and Martin had taken years before.

Around that time, Bay asked us to contribute reviews to the Shop's publication, *The Science Fiction Review Monthly*. The magazine was a dense publication of reviews and criticism. Contributors included Tom Disch and Samuel R. Delany, as well as Bay and Martin and a number of other, less well known, shop regulars. A few years later, Beth was offered a job at the Shop, where she received an invaluable, if sobering, education in the realities of the retail side of publishing. Through the Shop, we met a wide range of people in the SF community—fans and writers, editors, and publishers. In the late '70s the SF Shop was the place every writer stopped into when visiting New York, and every editor visited to see what was selling. Bay was at the heart of the intellectual ferment that created the flowering of science fiction in that time. The experience had a strong influence on our decision to make a living in the field.

Over the past decade, we drifted apart. It was almost as if Bay and Martin had done their job of improving our manners and opinions and set us loose on the world of publishing. When they sold the Shop a few years back, it felt as if a chapter in our lives had ended. And when we learned that Bay had lost his battle with cancer this spring, we felt as if we'd lost a family member, not just a friend. We'll miss him.

—Beth Meacham and Tappan King

Baird Searles died of lymphatic cancer in Montreal, Quebec, on March 22, 1993. He was fifty-eight years old.

Because of my forty-three year personal and sometimes professional relationship with him, I feel both emotionally too close and professionally too subjective to write about him. Therefore I have asked his good friend and former business associate Brian Thomsen to perform this task for me.

—Martin Last
Montreal, Quebec
March 28, 1993

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Baird Searles had been a reader of science fiction and fantasy since 1945, and in all of his various roles within the field, never lost his enthusiasm, love, and respect for the genre.

A true Renaissance man, Baird has been one of the field's best loved critics, with book reviews featured in *Asimov's Science Fiction* (a fourteen year tenure), the New York *Times, The Village Voice,* and *Publisher's Weekly,* and film reviews in *Amazing* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.* Among his numerous other published works were *Films of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Harry N. Abrams), *Epic! History on the Big Screen* (Harry N. Abrams), *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction* (with Martin Last, Beth Meacham, and Michael Franklin) (Avon Books), and *A Reader's Guide to Fantasy* (with Beth Meacham and Michael Franklin) (Avon Books). He also edited the fantasy anthology (with Brian M. Thomsen) *Halflings, Hobbits, Warrows & Weefolk* (Warner).

In 1973 he and Martin Last opened The Science Fiction Shop in New York City's West Village, providing customer service to rabid fans and casual readers of the genre alike. They sold the shop in 1986, and later emigrated to Montreal.

For the last six years Baird was a consulting editor for Warner Book's Questar line, where he actively advocated the addition of classic reprints to the list (such as works by Henry Kuttner, C.L. Moore, and Michael Moorcock's *Gloriana).*

A Personal Appreciation

In an era where the science fiction and fantasy fields are dominated by over-subcategorization (eg., magic-realism, cyberpunk, hard SF, etc), or literary classification (eg., Campbellian, Hartwellian, simple Del Ray fantasy, etc.), Baird always cut to the chase. "I liked/didn't like it because . . ." or "why is this book a fantasy" were frequently used phrases in his reviews. Entertainment and style were the two important criteria, and not what school, doctrine, or movement the author seemed to be expounding on. Thus a masterpiece of Delany stylization, or bang-bang shoot 'em-up in outer space could both be reviewed side by side, even though the merits of one were not necessarily the same as the other. Though a professional in the field, his reviews were always aimed at the well-read consumer, hoping to introduce them to some new work that might entertain them.

Baird introduced me to the works of Thomas Burnett Swann, C. L. Moore, and Henry Kuttner, and we shared passions for stylish historical fantasies, page-turning space operas, and such TV programs as "Wiseguy," "The Sandbaggers," and "Black Adder." Even after I left Warner, we continued to talk often about such really important subjects as books, movies, and gossip of yesterday. He was a Renaissance man in a field where most critics seem to favor Reformation. I will miss him greatly, as a reviewer, a colleague, and a friend.

—Brian M. Thomsen

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

World of a Null

The Wall At the Edge of the World
By Jim Aikin
Ace, $4.99 (paper)

So far as Danlo is concerned, humanity consists of The Body of Harmony, a large community of humans dwelling in the Seral Valley in what used to be California a thousand years ago. The Harmony is maintained because it is a telepathic society, descended from genetic wild cards that began to appear in human societies around the twentieth century. They eventually united under a couple who became known as Frank and Olivia, and brought about the Cleansing, where by use of bacteriological weapons, they wiped out all the "nulls," the non-telepathic.

Since then, the Body has maintained a strict status quo, which included killing any of its own offspring who did not develop telepathic powers in mid-adolescence, who are in effect nulls. This was done ritually, in the name of Frank and Olivia, who are worshiped and who can be evoked through the continuity of the telepathic community.

What the Body doesn't know is that in the middle of the continent there are tribes of nulls who escaped the Cleansing, but sank into savagery. One such is losing its men to a mysterious illness; the women mount an expedition to the West to find men they can give to their gods in hope of saving their own men.

Jim Aikin's *The Wall At the Edge of the World* is in essence the classic (perhaps the *most* classic) SF idea, that of the static society undermined by one or more rebel members. The above-mentioned Danlo is a respected member of society who has the wild talent of being able to hide his thoughts from the joddies, the mind police who maintain the harmony of the Body. His wife has been killed as a null; since then he has been in an inchoate state of rebellion, particularly as to the killing of nulls. He is one of the men captured when the wild women's expedition finds the Body. The women proceed to kidnap any males they happen to find along the "Wall" which was built to symbolically keep the wilderness out. They are easily tracked by telepathy, and the men are rescued, most of the wild women killed. But Danlo decides he doesn't want to go back to "civilization," and escapes with Linnie, one of the null women who teaches him how to survive in the wilderness (not without a lot of misunderstanding on both sides).

Danlo decides to try and rescue as many nulls as he can from

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death at the hands of the Body, and returns, to put together an odd band of helpers. Linnie, two young male nulls who are about to be killed, a young woman whose wild talents are even greater than Danlo's, and a rogue joddie who has kept his secret doubts by becoming schizophrenic, hiding his renegade thoughts in the mind of the young boy he had been, rigidly separated from his conscious self. Eventually Danlo must face the wrath of Frank and Olivia themselves, returned by the turmoil Danlo has caused.

This is one of those unfortunate novels that sounds drearily standard in synopsis, because there's no real room to mention the neat twists that Aikin gives his people, background, and plot. The story is not without its surprises.

Gamy Future

Burning Bright

By Melissa Scott
Tor, $21.95

There are the Hsaioi-An worlds, and the Republic, and then there are the non-aligned worlds, of which Burning Bright (which gives its name to Melissa Scott's new novel) is probably the most distinctive. The only land mass on Burning Bright is largely artificial, one of the great engineering feats of humanity. But mostly its fame rests on its preeminence in the field of virtual reality gaming, which seems to be the major preoccupation of most of humanity and a major occupation of much of Burning Bright's population.

Along comes female spaceship pilot Lioe, a rising star in gaming creation, who has never been to BB, but is forced to lay over there for repairs. You guessed it—she gets involved, purely by accident, in the complex politics of the world as well as its games. The top game creator, Ransome aka Ambidexter, retired from gaming, is lured back in by the stir Lioe makes, using some of his characters. He, in turn, is involved as an agent for the human ambassador to BB from the alien Hsaioi-An, who, in turn, is beholden to the Visiting Speaker from the Hsaioi-An. A complex plot revolves around political and commercial intrigue which involves all sorts of skullduggery that Lioe resolves with a clever twist of the gaming networks.

There's not that much that's really new here, but Ms. Scott impresses, as she has before, with the intricate details of her settings and the Byzantine complications of her plot. There had been something of a problem in her previous novel with perhaps too much expected of the reader (it took a while to cotton to the fact that the word "virtual" in her future argot meant virtual reality, for instance; she didn't bother to tell you). There's a bit of that here—you have to reach for the fact that a character is introduced as Altagracian, the Chrestil-Brisch Pensionary, and in the next sentence referred to as Chrestillio, and that the sudden introduction of VDIRT takes some careful backward researching to find the words "virtual display in real time" and is not a future detergent implying victory over grime. One might also complain that her alien Hsaioi-An have been exposed to too much knowledge of the Far Eastern cultures of Earth. But my major com-

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plaint, despite my enjoyment of her sophisticated background and characters (the plot is propelled by two pairs of same sex lovers) and her labyrinthian plot, is about an interstellar future where the major pursuit of mankind is to be electronically enhanced role-playing games. There must be something better than this ahead!

City On the Thamys

The Architecture of Desire

By Mary Gentle
Viking-Roc, $19

Every once in a while a book comes along that almost defies description. Usually it's because when described, it sounds trite, nonsensical, or both, and this is because its value is not in what is said but how it's said, not in matter, but manner. SF and fantasy have their own variation on this; you can have the wispiest of plots set in a created milieu of such interest that the wispiness is of minor concern. In a sense, the background becomes the foreground.

What *happens* in Mary Gentle's *The Architecture of Desire* is not terribly gripping. A sexual quadrangle is formed: an architect, his wife, a mercenary, the last two competing for a young woman. There is a suicide (which could have been prevented by someone acting sooner, always an annoying situation) and a near execution, foiled at the last possible second.

But the background will keep the historically minded reader fascinated. The country is surely England. London is set out for and achieved; it is on the river Thamys. But *what* England? I was guessing, from the costume descriptions, a time about equivalent to Queen Anne, but it's revealed that there's been a revolution. And one realizes early on that this is a society with few sexual distinctions; half the company of gentleman-mercenaries we meet early on are women, treated no differently than the men. So when it emerges that the country is under the rule of a female Protector General named Olivia whose followers are Puritans, and the elaborately dressed Royalists follow a Queen named Carola (the second of that name), well . . .

Isaac Newton, John Aubrey, and William Harvey make cameo appearances. And there's no shortage of fantasy in this strange England. The architect's wife is a "Soldier-Scholar" graduated to Master Physician of the Invisible College and is an adept at *magia*. A werewolf passes through. The heads on spikes on Southwark Bridge repeat their confessions endlessly. The little quirks of this time and place are continually surprising.

It's not that the plot or characters are flat—the latter are certainly more fully drawn and more realistic (therefore more ambiguous and less obvious) than most of the people of fantasy. It's just that their inventive and unique world keeps upstaging them.

Charmed, I'm Sure

Slay and Rescue

By John Moore
Baen, $4.99 (paper)

Despite the sanguinary title of John Moore's *Slay and Rescue*, it turns out to be a humorous fantasy, and a charming one at that. This could be because it's about the

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adventures of Prince Charming (before he becomes King Charming) and Moore has done a delicious job of cobbling together at least three fairy tales, all featuring that ubiquitous meddler whose job it is in life to "slay and rescue."

Not that he's all that hot to keep doing it. He's still only eighteen, certainly charming enough to merit his name (and authentically so—this is not fake charisma), but still a virgin. All that he has been offered by the princesses he has rescued so far as reward is a chaste kiss on the cheek (one of the more butch ones punched him in the shoulder). By this time His Highness (of Illyria, one of the twenty kingdoms) wants a little more. This is beyond the comprehension of his eleven-year-old page, squire, and general dogsbody, Wendell, much of whose dialogue consists of "Sheesh," especially when it concerns females.

This is the story of an especially complicated mission to a neighboring kingdom where the widowed ruling Queen is being particularly nasty to her stepdaughter. When Charming arrives, he's extremely taken with her—the Queen, that is (her wardrobe runs to things like black fishnet stockings). However, at the crucial moment she learns that Charming is still a virgin, and immediately embroils him in a magic quest that needs a virgin (it's for some sort of Grail, very handy in magic making).

Turns out that on the specified location is not a Chapel Perilous, but an enchanted castle surrounded by thorn bushes and containing one enchanted princess and a dragon (who has eaten all the other sleeping residents). There is the necessary dragon confrontation, the awakening of the princess (naturally named Aurora), and the usual peck on the cheek. However, it turns out that she is pregnant, having fooled around with her fiancé before the wedding. He, fortunately or unfortunately, was left outside of the thorn bushes and the enchantment.

So Charming comes home with two princesses in tow, having brought the Queen's stepdaughter along on the quest. Then the "slipper thing" gets solved by the Court Wizard, and they find a lady who had left her glass slipper at a ball a while back. Unlike the two peaches and cream princesses, this is one tough red-headed cookie, but inseparable from her fairy godmother, who, it turns out, was the fairy responsible for Aurora's enchantment. Then the father of her child is revealed. . . .

All in all, good vulgar fun, and a neat job of melding and modernizing.

Artistry/Art History

Virgil Finlay's Strange Science & *Virgil Finlay's Women of the Ages*
By Virgil Finlay
Underwood-Miller, each $14.95 (paper), $24.95 (cloth)

As I've noted in this space before, one of the joys of the magazine era of SF (approximately up to the mid-1950s) was to buy monthly (or bimonthly) issues of one of the approximately dozen magazines and not only get, with luck, one or more stories by favorite authors, but at least one and often more illustrations per story. Now many of these

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were indeed pulpy (which sometimes had its own quality—Bergey's covers, for instance, have a high camp value now—all those brass bras), but SF developed some truly brilliant illustrative stylists, which I don't think can be said of any of the other pulp genres.

There was the clever Edd Cartier, with his clear, almost cartoonish line drawings and wonderfully conceived BEMs and machines; the extraordinarily stylish Hannes Bok, heavily influenced by Maxfield Parrish but with a unique style of his own; and then the most popular of all, Virgil Finlay.

He was a superb draughtsman; his men and women were dazzlingly beautiful (when supposed to be) in face and figure. Machines were also sleekly handsome. But his trademark was the starbursts, rays, flames, orbs, lightning bolts, bubbles, and other fantastic visual effects with which his drawings were often decorated, all drawn with exquisite detail and an astonishing array of textures. I'm not knowledgeable enough to give technical details, but the stippling and crosshatching variations are so minutely perfect that one is in awe when realizing the comparatively crude (by our standards) tools with which he was working.

We have now two excellent collections of Finlay's art, which together give a wonderful selection of his work from the thirties through the fifties (he died in 1971) with nearly 150 full page b&w drawings per volume. They contain not only a large selection of his illustrations from the SF, fantasy and horror pulps, but also much rarer drawings from *The American Weekly* (a Sunday newspaper magazine edited by A. Merritt—see below) and the astrological magazines he did much work for later in his career. One might find the title and theme of the first, *Women of the Ages,* somewhat redolent of a sexist, girlie, calendar art past, but as noted, all his humans were exquisitely done, and the artwork of the pulps often tried to be suggestive without being, by the day's standards, lewd. This in the hands of others was often just plain shoddy, but Finlay's women, breasts and genitals hidden by an artful array of devices (tentacles to spaceships), transcended the cheap and exploitative. In this volume will be found what is perhaps my favorite Finlay—a double portrait of the heads of a dryad and a unicorn, done for C. L. Moore's "Daemon." It knocked me out the first time I saw it in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries,* and still does.

The second volume is titled *Strange Science* to cover the range of SF and fantasy included. Here again the two prizes are for a C. L. Moore work, done with Henry Kuttner, *Earth's Last Citadel.* This would figure, since those two authors, so often collaborators, were the heirs to A. Merritt's great tradition of science fantasy, and Merritt and Finlay were one of those blessed combinations of prose and illustration that would seem to come from one mind. Finlay's elaborate visual fantasies fit Merritt's jeweled prose like a glove. The two volumes are liberally sprinkled with the great drawings Finlay did for Merritt's works, usually twice, once for magazine reprints in the thirties, and again for reprints a de-

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cade later. What luck that these volumes arrive just in time for the Merritt reprint revival to which, as some of you readers may have noticed, I have been devoting a bit of space.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Ben Bova has never been content just to write fiction; there's always been a sort of compulsion to share process as well as result. His latest anthology, *Challenges*, seems a perfect example. A collection of stories old and new, each one is framed with a commentary on the story, a dissection if you will. Aspiring writers particularly take notice (Tor, $21.95).

Reprints, etc. . . . A reprint more than deserving of note is Ken Grimwood's *Replay*. I gave it high praise when it was first published back in 1987, and it went on to win the World Fantasy Award, but perhaps because it wasn't initially marketed as a fantasy, it hasn't had the readership it certainly deserves. The story is that of a man (a pretty ordinary man) who lives his life over and over again, and the variations Grimwood brings to this theme are truly astonishing (Ace, $4.99, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Modern Classics of Science Fiction*, edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's, $15.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review should be sent to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. ●

BAIRD SEARLES AWARD

Asimov's Science Fiction magazine, together with Martin Last, announces the creation of the Baird Searles Award for Best Young Writer. The Award will be given in conjunction with the Isaac Asimov Award for best science fiction or fantasy story by a full-time undergraduate. The Searles Award will be limited to the best story by a full-time college student twenty-one and under.

The two awards will not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Submissions for both should be sent to: Isaac Asimov Award, USF 3177, 4204 E. Fowler, Tampa, Florida 33620-3177, by November 15, 1993. Contestants should specify their age on each manuscript.

A special memorial fund for the award has been set up by Martin Last. This fund was created by the financial donations that family, friends, and colleagues made in Baird Searles's memory. The Baird Searles Award winner will receive $100 from the memorial fund and a certificate from the magazine. The winner will be announced next March at the Conference of the Fantastic in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

This award will celebrate Bay's openness to new ideas, new books, and new authors. It is a reminder, too, of that youthful enthusiasm that opened up the worlds of science fiction and fantasy to most of us. In all his years as a writer and a reviewer, Baird Searles never lost touch with that sense of wonder and excitement that first inspired so many of our readers and authors.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

A lot of comics and media con(vention)s the week before the WorldCon by the Bay. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

AUGUST 1993

20-22—**BuboniCon.** For info, write: **Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176.** Or phone: **(505) 266-8905** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Albuquerque NM (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Howard Johnson's East. Guests will include: K. Anderson, R. Cornett, A. Eastburn, J. Roberson.

19-22—**Comic Con. (619) 491-2475.** Convention Center, San Diego CA. Roger Zelazny, Mike Whelan.

20-22—**NecronomiCon.** Sheraton, Danvers MA. Gahan Wilson, Robert Bloch. Lovecraft/Cthulhu mythos.

20-22—**PrisonerCon.** Portmeirion Hotel, Portmeirion UK. Where "The Prisoner" TV show was filmed.

21-22—**Japan Nat'l. Con. (+81-6) 973-7595 (voice or fax).** Int'l. Cultural Center, Osaka Japan.

21-22—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562.** Holiday Inn, 13th Ave. S. & I-29, Fargo ND. Comic book show.

27-29—**French Nat'l. Con.** Centre Culturel de la Source, Orleans France. Main guests to be women.

27-29—**DeepSeaCon.** SS *Hamburg,* Hamburg Germany. SF-theme luxury cruise to England and back.

27-29—**Zombie Jamboree. (800) 926-6653.** Expomart, Pittsburgh PA. "Night of the Living Dead" con.

28-29—**LanternCon. (701) 235-2562.** Radisson Inn, 800 S. 3rd St., Bismarck ND. Comic book show.

28-29—**ShuttleCon. (209) 584-2577.** Fresno CA. Star Trek/media-oriented con. Over 1,500 expected.

28-29—**Comex. (510) 222-8663.** San Jose CA. John Skipp, Craig Spector. Comic book exposition.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon. Moscone Conv. Cent., San Francisco CA. $145 at door.

9-12—**Tage der Phantastik, Box 2120, Wetzlar D-W-6330, Germany. (06441) 405-570 voice, -395 fax.**

10-12—**MinnCon, 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** M. & S. R. Tem. Horror.

17-19—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364, -3672.** Hambly, D. Martin, Fahnestalk.

17-19—**OutsideCon, Box 835, St. Bethlehem TN 37155. (615) 552-2130.** SF/fantasy campout weekend.

17-19—**Gaming Convention, 207 Bernard Dr. NW, Calgary AB T3K 2B6.** Marlborough Community Hall.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Convention. US$85.

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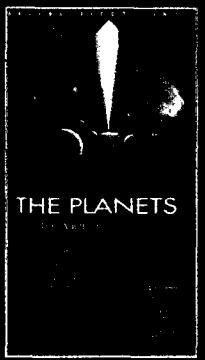

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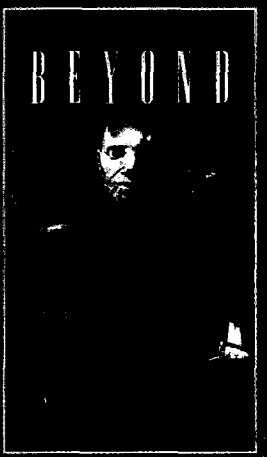
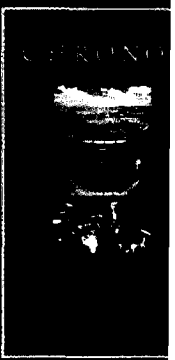


Beyond The Mind's Eye

A surreal voyage, bridging the gap between reality and imagination. Forging the latest computer animation technology and artistry with original music composed and performed by Grammy Award winner, Ian Hammer, this platinum selling video will take you from the inner depths of the human psyche to the outer reaches of the universe.



Chronos

The celebrated 70mm film features time lap images of the greatest wonders of the world including the Vatican Acropolis and the Sph Directed by Ron Frick "Chronos" is a mesm ing journey through t "An expertly crafted m of music and images." – People Magazine. 80017-3

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